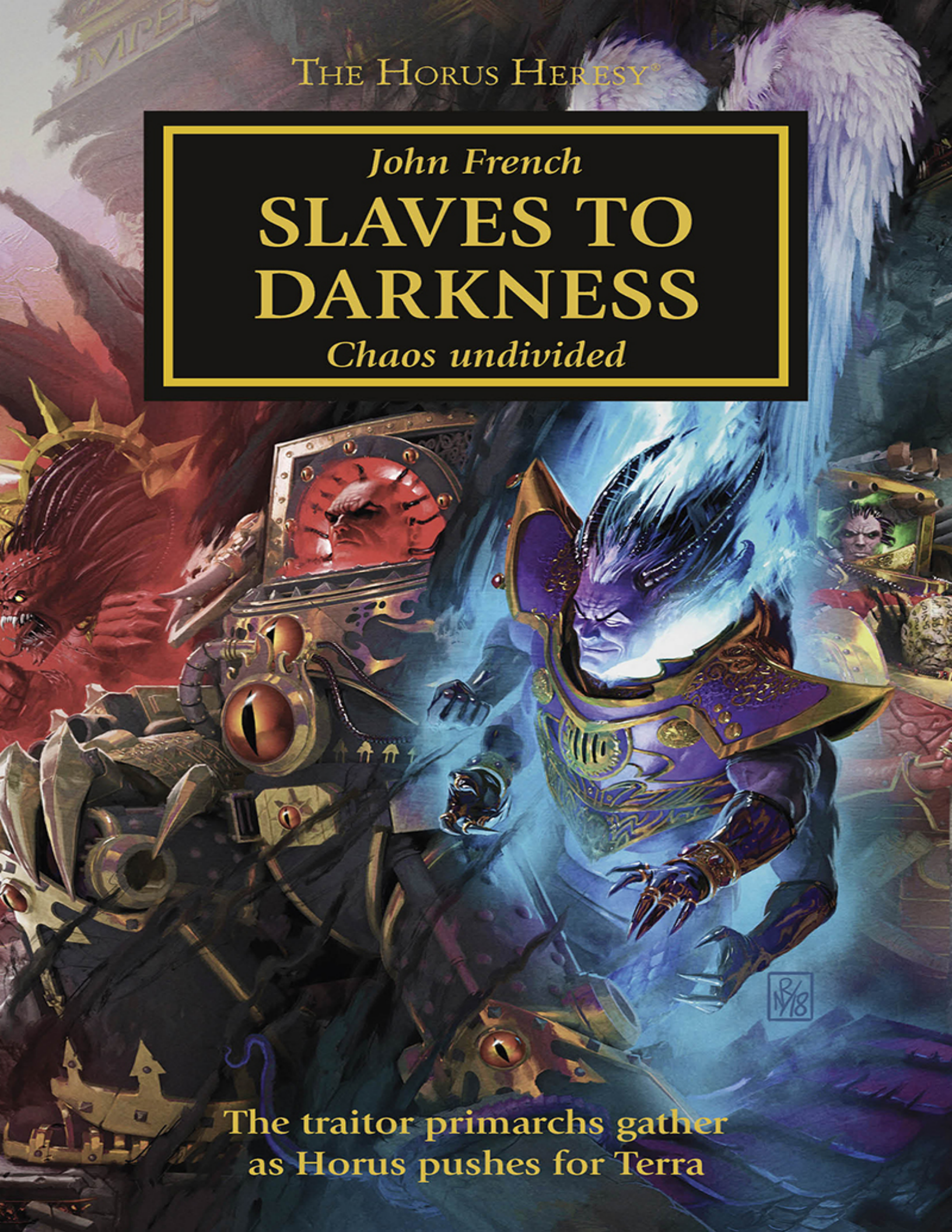
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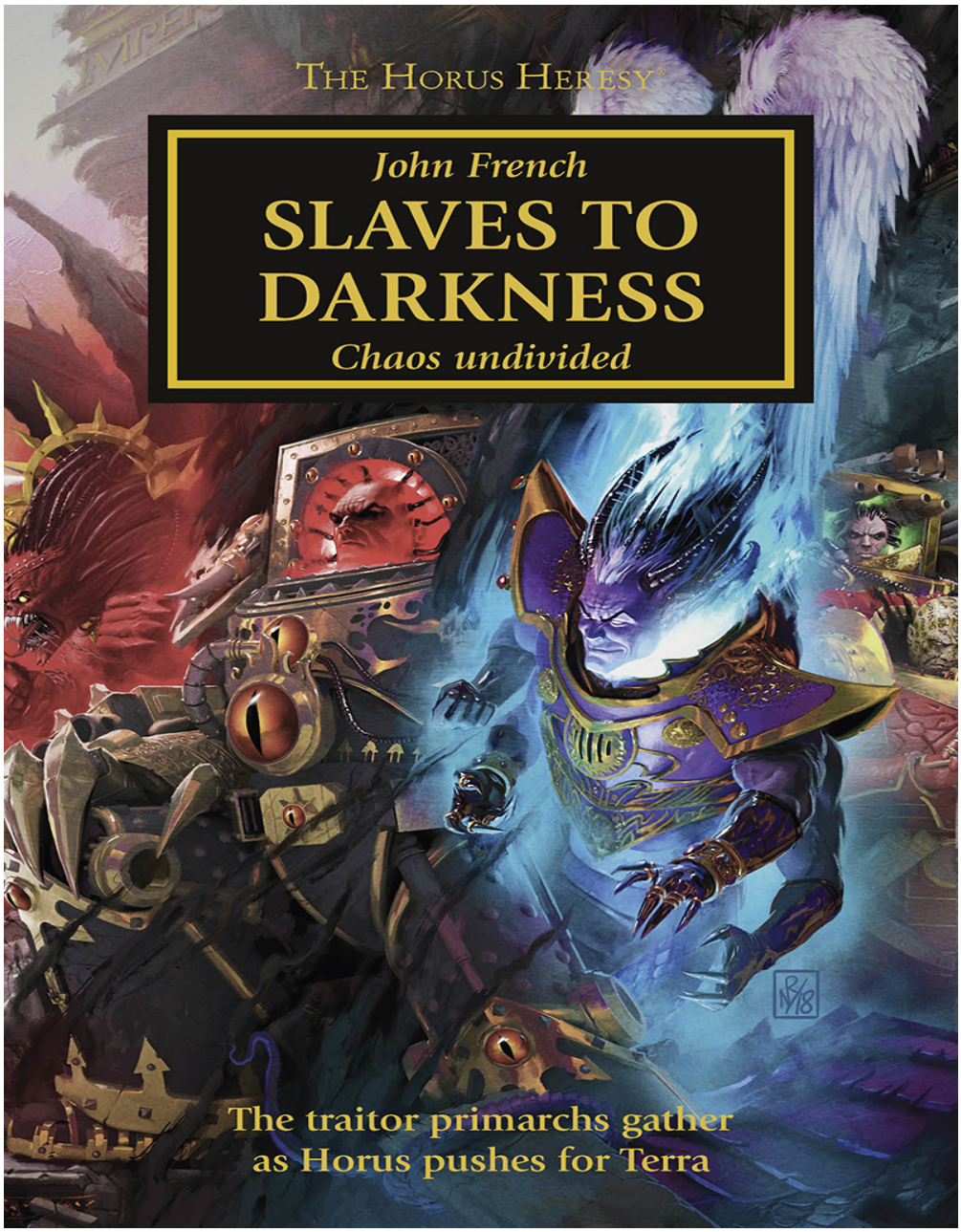
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BACKLIST

Book 1 – HORUS RISING

Book 2 – FALSE GODS

Book 3 – GALAXY IN FLAMES

Book 4 – THE FLIGHT OF THE EISENSTEIN

Book 5 – FULGRIM

Book 6 – DESCENT OF ANGELS

Book 7 – LEGION

Book 8 – BATTLE FOR THE ABYSS

Book 9 – MECHANICUM

Book 10 – TALES OF HERESY

Book 11 – FALLEN ANGELS

Book 12 – A THOUSAND SONS

Book 13 – NEMESIS

Book 14 – THE FIRST HERETIC

Book 15 – PROSPERO BURNS

Book 16 – AGE OF DARKNESS

Book 17 – THE OUTCAST DEAD

Book 18 – DELIVERANCE LOST

Book 19 – KNOW NO FEAR

Book 20 – THE PRIMARCHS

Book 21 – FEAR TO TREAD

Book 22 – SHADOWS OF TREACHERY

Book 23 – ANGEL EXTERMINATUS

Book 24 – BETRAYER

Book 25 – MARK OF CALTH

Book 26 – VULKAN LIVES

Book 27 – THE UNREMEMBERED EMPIRE

Book 28 – SCARS

Book 29 – VENGEFUL SPIRIT
Book 30 – THE DAMNATION OF PYTHOS
Book 31 – LEGACIES OF BETRAYAL
Book 32 – DEATHFIRE
Book 33 – WAR WITHOUT END
Book 34 – PHAROS
Book 35 – EYE OF TERRA
Book 36 – THE PATH OF HEAVEN
Book 37 – THE SILENT WAR
Book 38 – ANGELS OF CALIBAN
Book 39 – PRAETORIAN OF DORN
Book 40 – CORAX
Book 41 – THE MASTER OF MANKIND
Book 42 – GARRO
Book 43 – SHATTERED LEGIONS
Book 44 – THE CRIMSON KING
Book 45 – TALLARN
Book 46 – RUINSTORM
Book 47 – OLD EARTH
Book 48 – THE BURDEN OF LOYALTY
Book 49 – WOLFSBANE
Book 50 – BORN OF FLAME

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TEMPLAR

ECHOES OF RUIN

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CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
The Horus Heresy
Dramatis Personae
Prologue
Part One
One
Two
Three
Four
Part Two
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Thirteen
Fourteen
Fifteen
Part Three
Sixteen
Seventeen
Eighteen
Nineteen

Epilogue
Afterword
About the Author
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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

Dedicated to the memory of Alan Bligh,
1974-2017

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Primarchs

Horus Lupercal, The Warmaster, Primarch of the XVI Legion

Fulgrim, Prince of Pleasure, Daemon Primarch of the III Legion

Perturabo, The Lord of Iron, Primarch of the IV Legion

Angron, Prince of Blood, Daemon Primarch of the XII Legion

Mortarion, The Death Lord, Primarch of the XIV Legion

Magnus the Red, Prince of Change, Daemon Primarch of the XV Legion

Lorgar Aurelian, Primarch of the XVII Legion

Alpharius, Primarch of the XX Legion

The XVI Legion 'Sons of Horus'

Maloghurst, 'The Twisted', equerry to the Warmaster

Ezekyle Abaddon, First Captain

Horus Aximand, 'Little Horus', Captain, Fifth Company

Falkus Kibre, 'Widowmaker', Captain, Justaerin Cohort

Kalus Ekaddon, Captain, Catulan Reaver Squad

Argonis, 'The Unscarred', emissary of the Warmaster

The III Legion 'Emperor's Children'

Eidolon, 'The Risen', Lord Commander

The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'

Forrix, 'The Breaker', First Captain, triarch

Volk, Commander of 786th Grand Flight

The XII Legion 'World Eaters'

Khârn, Captain, Eighth Company, and Equerry to Angron

The XVII Legion 'Word Bearers'

Zardu Layak, 'The Crimson Apostle', Master of the Unspeaking

Kulnar, Slave of the Anakatis Blade

Hebek, Slave of the Anakatis Blade

Others

Actaea, Oracle of the Ashen Saint

Sota-Nul, Ambassador of Kelbor-Hal

The Neverborn

N'kari, Exalted Daemon Prince of Slaanesh

Amarok, Psychopomp

Sa'ra'am, The Daemon Beneath, the Knife's Edge, the Laughter of War

Tormageddon

‘Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence: throw away respect,
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while:
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?’

– attributed to the dramaturge Shakespire (fl. M2)

‘Call for all your chattels,

Call forth the might of your land arrayed in fine steel, set them to parade before us so that they may still pass and the sun not set,

Raise your hand and hear their acclimation, so loud that it might wake Yodan and Karies from their red slumber,

Watch the sun glint off sword and spear, look into eyes that see nothing but glory in the clamour of arms and wish to hear no greater music,

Have this done, and set it before me, and I will say that I see only the grin of skulls, and hear the cry of wind through bones.’

– from the Crone’s Reply to the Queen
in the Mystery Cycles of Colchis

‘*And this, too, shall pass.*’

– saying of ancient Terra

PROLOGUE

The Eve of Triumph

The cloaked figure walked across the plain that had been a mountain. The light of temporary camps the size of cities stained the night sky. The engine fires of warships shone brighter than the stars in the dark, and the passage of mass lifters and macro-shuttles scratched orange wounds across the horizon. Here, on the half a kilometre-wide parade avenue, nothing moved except the flames of the torch pillars rippling in the wind.

The figure paused and turned in place, looking behind him. He could see into the far distance, the darkness dissolving before his gaze. Gunships and drop-ships sat in neat squares that were camps for the most honoured of the assembling forces. Lights moved amongst the earth-bound warbirds. A peal of distant laughter reached his ears as the wind changed direction. For a second, he fancied he could hear the dry joke that had prompted the sound, and in his mind's eye he saw a warrior slapping another on the back. Across the plateau, brothers of different blood but born to a single purpose would be sharing similar moments of comradeship.

He listened for a moment.

'I was there,' said a voice from a cluster of armoured figures gathered around a cage of red coals. None of them saw the listener standing at the edge of the flame light. The cloaked figure recognised the voice, and the story. A smile briefly touched his face beneath his cowl. 'I was there the day Horus slew…' The wind gusted, snatching the words away and sending sparks billowing from the glowing coals.

The figure turned away and carried on walking down the empty parade. Tomorrow, millions of feet would march where he walked, but for now it was his and his alone that trod the road. The Imperial Dais loomed in the middle distance, a marble mountain set in place of those it had replaced.

Ten thousand artisans had laboured without sleep to coat it in the symbols of victory and power: statues of men and women clutching thunderbolts of bronze, eagles with gilded wings spread, the names of the millions who had fallen in mankind's two centuries of war to reclaim the stars. From its tiers and balconies, the high and honoured would watch the might of the Great Crusade pass, but for now it was empty and silent, its majesty cloaked in the brief night.

The figure set his eyes on the dais' silhouette and walked on. No one stopped him, though he knew that eyes both human and transhuman watched the ground he covered. None of them saw anything, save maybe a flicker in the dark or a spill of dust carried by the breeze.

He heard the arming of weapons as he stepped into the shadow of the dais. The subtle hum of exquisitely crafted armour murmured at the edge of hearing. He stopped and turned his gaze to the pools of deeper dark amongst the statuary. Five Custodians stood amidst the gloom, invisible to the mortal eye. Like him they were swathed in falsehoods, their shape and substance folded out of noticing. They knew something was there, but they did not know where or what he was. Such was the limit of even ascended humanity.

Carefully, he touched his left thumb to the ring on his forefinger. Circuitry in the circle of iron pulsed a signal into the dark. The Custodians hesitated, then began to shift out of aggressive posture.

'Why comes the stranger to the door at night?' said a voice from a dark niche in the base of the vast dais. 'Why, because he is no stranger,' said the voice again as the cloaked figure turned. An old man stepped into sight, a staff clutched in both hands, as though to help him walk. Malcador, Sigillite of the Imperium and aide to the Emperor of Mankind, looked directly at the hidden figure and raised an eyebrow.

'Wishing for solitude, Horus Lupercal?'

'Something like that,' said Horus as he dropped the falsehood from his head.

'Would you believe that so was I?' asked Malcador.

'No,' said Horus, and smiled. 'I wouldn't.'

'Neither would I.' The old man gave a dry chuckle. 'May I share in yours, though?'

Horus nodded.

‘Come,’ said Malcador, gesturing towards an open door in the base of the dais. A flight of wide stairs rose beyond the threshold. The pair passed through and began to climb.

‘He told you,’ said Malcador after a while.

Horus nodded.

‘Yes.’

‘You are surprised?’

‘I am… uncertain.’

‘A disturbing feeling for you, I am sure,’ said Malcador. ‘He thought that you would be.’

Horus glanced at the old man walking beside him.

‘And yet He still wishes me to do this?’

‘Of course,’ said Malcador. ‘Do you not do the same when you place trust in your commanders? In Abaddon? In the Twisted?’

‘I do wish they had not gifted him with that name,’ said Horus.

Malcador gave a small snort of laughter.

‘A little crass perhaps, but if the glove fits…’

‘From you that must be a compliment.’

‘Indeed,’ said Malcador, and smiled.

They lapsed back into silence and continued to climb. At last the procession of stairs led into a wide corridor. A door opened to the night at the far end. Banners hung from the walls, each of them woven with symbols in metallic thread on silk: a red lightning bolt, a ring of red teeth, a wolf’s head set against a sickle moon. Horus paused for a second to look at the wolf-head banner, and then the primarch and the Voice of the Emperor of Mankind stepped through the door and onto a broad balcony. The night air fell away to the plain beyond. The lights of the Legion camps and the distant glow of the Mechanicum construction conurbations lay before them, embers scattered on sable.

The wind gusted, dragging at Horus’ cloak as he leaned on the balustrade.

‘Can I refuse?’ he asked at last.

‘Of course,’ said Malcador.

Horus looked down at the parade avenue, now far below them.

‘And if I accept?’

‘Then things will change.’

‘The others…’

‘Will grow to accept it, too.’ Malcador looked up from the view and gave a smile. ‘As will you.’

Horus looked at him sharply. The Sigillite held the primarch’s gaze. Horus looked away after a moment.

‘Perhaps.’

Malcador raised an eyebrow but remained silent.

‘It will change everything,’ said Horus at last.

‘Everything changes…’

‘And nothing changes,’ said Horus, his shadowed face forming a brief smile.

‘Oh, I think that part does not apply to this, do you?’ The wind gusted, and the banner poles set beneath the balustrade rattled in their fixings. ‘You wonder how it will affect you…’

It was Horus’ turn to raise an eyebrow.

‘I do not mean that you doubt yourself, my friend, just that you wonder what the world will be after this. And, yes, it will change you – how could it not? But you will rise, Horus. The Emperor did not make this decision lightly. He knows that you will become what you always promised to be.’ Malcador paused and shifted his weight on his staff. ‘The others… Yes, some will resent it, some will even resist, but ultimately all will accept it.’

‘I was wondering what I would do if this duty had been given to another, to Roboute or Rogal…’

‘And?’ asked Malcador. ‘What would you have done?’

‘I would have wondered why it had not been given to me,’ said Horus, then laughed, the sound bright against the breath of the wind. ‘Then I would accept it and do everything I could to help them bear such a burden.’

‘Quite so,’ said Malcador, ‘and many of your brothers will do just that. Listen to them, Horus. You will need their help, just as the Emperor needs yours.’

‘Does He?’ said Horus lightly. ‘I have never known anything to be beyond His grasp.’

‘But you are His reach and His grasp, Horus. He accomplishes what He does through those who serve and love Him. Through you.’

‘Yet He did not say that when He told me of this duty.’

‘No, He left it to me.’

‘Working through His instruments…’

‘Exactly.’

Horus nodded, though his expression remained unchanged. Malcador straightened and turned away from the balustrade.

‘You know the truth of what I am about to say, but I will say it anyway. Take the lesson of the Emperor to heart. Every blade and warrior in the Crusade will answer to you. Learn their nature, as if for the first time. Use them as you must, and do not fear that they will see you change. You are going to be their leader, but you will need *them* to make you Warmaster.’

‘Warmaster… So you think I *will* accept it?’

‘I think you already have.’ Malcador began to walk away, his staff tapping out the slow rhythm of his steps. In the dark, a pair of Custodians who had remained like statues unfolded with a melody of armour servos and fell in beside the Sigillite. ‘Good night, Horus Lupercal. Until tomorrow.’

Horus remained, looking out at the view of the Plain of Triumph. The lights of stars and campfires found reflections in his eyes. Then he straightened and walked away with only a single glance behind him.

PART ONE
THAT THE SONS OF GODS MAY BLEED

ONE

Maloghurst

The Sons of Horus bore their father bleeding to his throne. Ghosts followed them, howling from the shadows as the blood shook from their armour. There were four sons: Kibre, the black of his plate glossed with gore; Horus Aximand, his flayed face pale, eyes fixed on the red maw grinning from his Warmaster's side, the armour still rent and smoking; Tormageddon, glittering with ghost-light, silent as smoke; and Maloghurst, who followed them gasping into his breath mask, limping with twisted limbs.

The Justaerin thundered in their wake. Black Terminator armour glinted wetly with blood in the stuttering alarm lights.

'Sire,' called Aximand, grunting the word through the effort of lifting the Warmaster. 'Sire, can you hear us?'

'I…' Horus' mouth was a crack in the pale mask of his face. The fur and velvet of his cloak dragged on the floor, holed and charred, smearing onto the deck in his wake.

Maloghurst tasted warm iron, sulphur and honey through his mask. Horus' head shook. The wound in his side opened wider, the armour crumpling like skin around a sneering mouth.

'Sire!' called Aximand.

A human in the red-and-black robes of a senior bonded officer emerged from a junction as they passed. The bronze data-slate in the man's hands fell to the floor as he knelt, but Maloghurst saw the human's eyes touch the Warmaster before he pressed his forehead to the floor. Maloghurst turned aside and kicked. Pain lanced through his back as the servos in his armour snapped his leg straight. The human flew backwards, his head a crumpled ruin of meat and shattered bone. Maloghurst let out a grunt of discomfort.

'What…' began Aximand.

'He saw!' growled Maloghurst and staggered after the others.

‘Justaerin,’ called Kibre, his voice booming over the vox as he moved. ‘Kill order, command deck, passages ninety-five through two hundred. No survivors!’

The Terminators peeled away. Gunfire echoed down tunnels. Muzzle flare flashed from passage openings as they passed. Screams rose and were silenced.

‘The tides shift…’ hissed Tormageddon as he loped with fluid grace beneath the Warmaster’s weight. ***‘He is–’***

‘Silence!’ shouted Maloghurst, the word shaking with rage. The daemon-vessel hissed in reply.

They reached the throne room. The doors opened at their approach. Starlight and flame diluted the darkness beyond. At the far end, the throne loomed before the open eye of a viewport. They hurried across the dark expanse. Blood scattered to the floor behind them, smoking as it touched air. The bowls of burning oil hanging from the ceiling guttered. Shadows grew in their wake. Ethereal cries rose through the dark as more blood fell to the deck.

‘Seal the doors,’ shouted Maloghurst to the two Justaerin who had followed them. ‘No one enters. No one!’

They set the Warmaster down at the foot of the throne.

‘We must get the Apothecaries,’ said Aximand.

The great chair of basalt and black iron rose above them.

‘This is beyond them,’ snarled Maloghurst.

‘What is happening to him?’ asked Aximand, looking at the still figure of Tormageddon standing a step back from the others. The daemonhost shook its head once slowly.

‘I cannot look at him. The warp is broken edges and crow calls.’

‘We must–’ began Kibre.

‘My… my throne…’ whispered Horus, and for a second his four sons froze. ‘My… father…’

None of them moved. A drop of blood slid from the lips of the wound in the Warmaster’s side and struck the floor as a puff of ash. Kibre turned his head and looked at Maloghurst.

‘Get him to the throne!’ roared Maloghurst. He could feel it now, itching on the edge of his sight and at the back of his eyes. The warp was flowing around them, twisting tight like threads spinning into rope.

Their feet rang on the steps to the throne. Beyond the viewport Maloghurst could see the lights of Beta-Garmon's star burning like a cooling coal as it fell into the distance. Ice was forming on the crystal panes, spidering across the starlight.

With growls of effort, Horus' four sons lifted him onto the seat of his throne.

'Step back,' hissed Maloghurst.

Blood ran from the Warmaster's side, pooling and trickling onto the plinth in a black, smoking stream.

For a second nothing else moved. Horus' eyes were open, but if they saw anything, they fixed on nothing.

'What–' began Kibre once more.

A single metal claw scraped on the right arm of the throne. The four sons were utterly still. The flow of blood from the wound had slowed to a dripping ooze. A breath hissed from Horus' lips. His hand gripped the arm. Blades dug into black stone. Horus raised his head, eyes closing briefly, pale lips opening. His image was flickering, blurring into shadow and out of being.

Maloghurst stepped forwards.

The Warmaster's eyes opened.

Maloghurst felt the gaze touch him. A wave of heat rolled over him, and for a second he felt his body freeze, felt his flesh blast apart and scatter to the edge of time, felt his soul become a scream stretched to the edge of existence.

The image of the Warmaster shimmered then settled.

'It is… all right, Mal,' said Horus.

The four Sons of Horus knelt. The buzzing of their active armour throbbed in the quiet. Maloghurst felt his breath wheeze into his mask and allowed a measure of relief into his thoughts.

Horus took a long, slow breath. The wound in his side had closed. All that remained was a narrow line on his armour, still wet with blood. The low moaning that had itched at the edge of Maloghurst's awareness quieted.

'Sire,' said Aximand, 'you–'

'What is our position and strength?' said Horus. His face was still pale, but the shadows were flowing into the recesses of his face, hardening its lines.

‘The vanguard fleet is with us,’ said Aximand, still watching his primarch unblinkingly. ‘Legion battlefleets Acheron, Styx and Charon remain in-system, along with the vassal groups Bellum, Catullus, Ni-Rho-Delta, Malik, Duterron and Noctis. Engagements continue, but we have dominance. The gate of Beta-Garmon is open.’

‘Yet you pulled the vanguard away?’ said Horus.

‘Sire, you were…’

‘I know, Little Horus,’ said the Warmaster. His eyelids closed briefly. ‘I know. You did well, my sons.’

Beta-Garmon had eaten their strength for months, grinding down armour and gorging on bodies and bullets. The forces still loyal to the Emperor had fought with a ferocity and strength that had spilled more blood in that one system than had been shed in the last five years of the Great Crusade. There had been no choice, though, not for the Emperor’s forces and not for the Warmaster. Beta-Garmon was the gate to the Segmentum Solar. Charted warp routes converged and expanded from the system like the threads of a web. Through it, fleets of ships could run into the reaches of stars around Terra. It was not the only gate to the Solar Domain, but it was the only one that mattered.

At last the deadlock had broken. Horus had taken to the field. With him was a spear tip of the Legion’s finest. Darkness and fire had followed them, as though they were the shadow cast by the Warmaster’s presence. Maloghurst had remained, as he did so often now, with the *Vengeful Spirit* and the endless balances of power, now both occult and temporal, that allowed the wheels of Horus’ war machine to turn. He had not needed to see his lord walk amongst the slaughter, nor see those who faced him fall.

And all had happened as had been ordained. Their enemies had fallen, and the battle, so long unresolved, had swung.

Until Horus, striding through ashes and blood – the god of the empire he would win by war – had fallen.

Fallen without a blow being taken.

And his sons had taken him, as they had once before, bleeding from the battlefield.

Maloghurst was the first to raise his head to look at the enthroned Warmaster. A high, keening pain filled his skull. His eyes tried to focus. He felt blood on his teeth.

He dropped his gaze. The pain dimmed but did not vanish.

‘Sire, what is your will?’

‘Time,’ Horus rasped, and Maloghurst felt the pain that it cost his Warmaster to speak. ‘Time has run too far. Send for them. We… we must gather before…’ Horus’ eyes closed, agony radiating from him like heat from a suddenly blazing fire. Maloghurst clamped his teeth shut. Bubbles of migraine colour foamed across his vision. Horus was unmoving on his throne. Shadows flickered across the walls and floor of the throne room, as though light were shining from the Warmaster. But there was no light.

Maloghurst forced himself to stand. He tried to raise his head but could not. Aximand was already on his feet, backing away. Tormageddon was shimmering, the substance of its body dissolving and reforming like a grainy pict-image. Kibre remained kneeling at the foot of the throne, his fingers digging into the stone to hold himself in place.

‘Go…’ said Horus, his voice sounding as though it were carried from far away. ‘Summon them… My brothers…’

‘Sire,’ said Maloghurst, his voice shuddering as tidal waves of pain battered through him.

‘Ullanor,’ said Horus. ‘Ullanor…’

And then he was silent. His eyes shut. The shadows stilled, and the Warmaster sat bleeding and pale on his throne.

Layak

Screams cloaked the *Trisagion* as it rode the tides of the warp. Thirty-two thousand, seven hundred and sixty-eight humans hung from nails driven into the outside of its hull. All of them had been alive when the ship had passed from the cold of real space into the embrace of the Realm of Gods. They were still alive now after a fashion, their deaths stretched into an eternal cacophony of suffering. Daemons swarmed over them, clinging to the hull, lapping agony and delirium from the humans as their souls and bodies were torn apart. Seen from above, the *Trisagion*’s spear-blade hull seemed to wear a shifting skin of chitin and wet flesh. Torch towers burned above it, red flames billowing in slow rhythm with the screams of torment and the cries of the feeding daemons.

Beauty, whispered the voice in Layak’s skull. *Truth*…

He nodded.

‘Glory to the Eternal Four, for They are All,’ he said aloud, continuing the litany that he had been speaking without pause since the *Trisagion*

breached the veil into the Sacred Realm. ‘Glory to the Eightfold Truth, for it is Eternal. Glory to the First Circle of servants, for they are most high…’

He sat at the centre of a black glass floor, before the crystal window of the tower’s viewport. The smoke of burning incense breathed around him from censers swung by eight shrouded figures. Beneath their robes each of the supplicants was a riot of mutated and mortified flesh, but in the presence of the Crimson Apostle they hid their blessings. All of them had sacrificed their sight and hearing to serve him. To attend Zardu Layak, First Chaplain of the Unspeaking, the one who is both revelation and sacrifice, was a blessing beyond imagining. To see his unmasked face and hear his private words would be beyond their souls to bear.

Further back, beside the single door out of the tower sanctum, stood two hunched figures. Red velvet swathed them from head to foot and spilled onto the floor around them. They did not move, but a candle made of human fat, blood and bone ash hung in the air before each one. Sigils marked the black tallow, weeping clear tears onto the floor beneath the shrouded giants.

He approaches, he thought, and knew it to be true even as the thought whispered through him.

He rose from where he sat. He wore no robe or armour. In these moments of contemplation Layak always chose to remember that he was flesh. Smooth muscle flowed as he stood. Branded words covered his skin from neck to toes. Five hundred and twelve languages marked him. All were from cultures that had been dead for thousands of years, some human, some alien. Layak spoke every one.

He brought his hands up to his face, covering his eyes for a second.

‘*Ush-na-cathal*,’ he said. He felt the call hiss into the Sacred Realm, and heard an answer. Gossamer figures of black smoke congealed around him, indistinct, like sketches painted on parchment with water and ink. The shadows of faces formed in the coiling throng, screaming with silent agony, spitting hate, weeping. Whispers filled his mind.

Who are you?

+I do not want to die…+

Who are you?

+Oh, please have mercy…+

Who are you?

+Betrayer of oaths…+

Who are you?

+You are defiler of all that once you held sacred…+

Who are you?

+Why are you doing this?…+

‘*Us-ka-thed,*’ he commanded. The smoke figures reached out with ghostly fingers. Their touch slid over his skin. Ice-cold fire burned through his flesh.

+We know you, Nameless One…+ hissed the voices in his skull.

+We remember…+

+The dead remember…+

Layak held his mouth shut. The agony was a supernova at the core of his being. It felt like burning, like iron nails being hammered into bone. It felt like rebirth and revelation.

Armour formed over his skin. The shape of ceramite plates, of pauldrons and gauntlets, wove into existence as the shades wrapped him. Circuitry and fibre bundles came into being and meshed with his nerves. At last he stood clad in grey, the ashen plates of his armour covering all but his head.

‘*Hess-ne,*’ he spoke.

The shades faded, hissing hate and spite as they slid back out into the infinity of the Sacred Realm. The blessed agony he had endured faded from his flesh, and he bowed his head in thanks for its blessing. Last of all, he turned and stepped to the side of the room where his mask-helm looked down from his weapons rack. Its face snarled at him with frozen rage. Twin rows of three eyes ran down the bronze cheeks, each eye burning like a furnace coal. Its mouth was a wide pit of sharp silver. Two shards of obsidian rose in horns from its brows. It had been a gift from the first of the Gal-Vorbak, and he wore it always except in brief moments of solitary contemplation. Layak reached out and took it, feeling its malice tingle with the taste of blood on his tongue.

Carefully he settled the mask-helm over his head. The hooks of its inner face bit into his cheeks. The breather-pipes connected with his armour of their own accord. Incense-laced smoke filled his next breath. Whirls of Colchisian runes spun in his eyes. Colours and dimensions that mortals could not see repainted the room around him.

He is here, came the thought. He turned and knelt as the doors into the tower sanctuary opened. The red-swathed figures turned, their shrouds rippling as they knelt. The robed supplicants could neither hear the door

opening nor see who stepped through, but the presence of that being was enough to send them falling prostrate.

Lorgar Aurelian stood upon the threshold for a moment. His skin was dusted with golden powder, his cheeks and scalp painted with vertical lines of cuneiform. Crimson robes hung over his unarmoured flesh. But for his size, he would have looked like a priest from the dust planet that had raised him.

Presence radiated from him. This was not the rage that had haloed the now-exalted Prince of Blood, or the raw etheric power of Magnus. To stand close to Lorgar Aurelian was to want to hear him speak, to feel deep emotions stir at his smallest gesture, to feel one's soul both cower and exult.

Except that Layak felt nothing, just the hooks on the mask he wore cutting his face.

'Your beatitude,' he said.

'Rise, my son,' said Lorgar. 'I ask your forgiveness for disturbing your observance.'

'Where you walk, truth and transcendence follow,' said Layak. 'To receive you in this moment is to exchange a holy task for one greater.'

Lorgar bowed his head in acknowledgement, eyelids closing briefly.

'In two hours, we will emerge at the edge of Beta-Garmon, and there we will find the Warmaster. Messages fly by the lips of the god-made to my other brothers. He calls us together, to stand together one last time, as we once did at the feet of our father.'

Lorgar paused then walked to the crystal viewport, through which the nausea-light of the warp danced. For a second Layak wondered what the eyes of his primarch saw. The Sacred Realm was a mirror to souls, and what it showed was different to every mind that dared look upon it. Layak only saw the ghosts when he looked at the warp. He had long ago given up wondering why.

'We answer the Warmaster's summons and are blessed to do so,' said Layak.

'No,' said Lorgar. 'The message has not yet reached us, and will not arrive until after we are already at Horus' side. That does not matter, nor is it why we go. We enter the crucible, my son. From here the outcome of all will follow. Time and destiny draw to a point, and the wheel of the universe waits to turn around it. This has been revealed. It is written in the voices of the storm and the blood of the dying. The fate of all is waiting to be born.

Divine victory lies before us, before all humanity.’ Lorgar tuned his gaze on Layak. Reflections of screaming ghosts danced in his eyes. ‘Do you understand?’

Layak bowed his head at the words, feeling his thoughts shake.

‘Most sacred lord, how may I serve?’

Lorgar turned away again, and Layak felt the fire-glow of his primarch cool, as though it had been cast into shadow.

‘I hear the music of eternity, my son. Horus…’ He said the name slowly. ‘Something is… happening to Horus.’

Volk

‘Commander, the flight is cleared to begin final launch preparations.’

Volk did not answer the human serf. The words that the man spoke were a formality that he knew so well, their rhythms were like the beating of his hearts. He kept his gaze on the machine that lay on the rockcrete apron in front of him. Its burnished metal skin gleamed in the red glow of the hangar cavern. Yellow-and-black chevrons marked its tail fins and wing tips.

‘From Iron cometh Strength. From Strength cometh Will…’ said Volk, and watched the words spread in white clouds in front of him. The engines in his strike fighter lit. The air began to sing. ‘From Will cometh Faith…’

A servitor began to unplug cables from sockets in the back of his armour. A tech-priest in purple-and-copper robes moved around the strike fighter, oil flicking from its brass fingers. An adept followed in the priest’s wake, pulling arming tapers from weapons and closing access panels.

‘From Faith cometh Honour.’

Volk stepped towards his craft, moving slowly in his power-starved armour. He pulled himself up into the cockpit. The sockets in the back of his armour connected to the fighter’s systems.

‘From Honour cometh Iron.’

The strike fighter woke fully. Volk felt the nerve connection tingle up the sockets in his spine. Muscles and bones ached as the sensation of iron and weapons blended with flesh. He breathed out as he felt the engine power surge down his back and the armed weapons prickle his fingers. It felt like becoming whole.

The strike fighter had a number. That was the way amongst the IV Legion. Other Legions daubed their aircraft with names, like fools hanging bells from their ears. The Iron Warriors did not, and though the Lightning

Crow had been Volk's for four decades of war, its only honour was to bear the number after its unit designation: 786-1-1. The first craft of the first squadron of the 786th Grand Flight. What remained of it, at least.

'This is the Unbreakable Litany, and may it forever be so.'

Volk unfastened the helmet from his thigh and clamped it on his head. The canopy began to hinge closed above. Yellow light started to blink through the hangar cavern. Alert klaxons warred with the rising chorus of engines.

He closed his eyes. The silver augmetic eyeball that had filled his right socket for the last three decades unfolded a crude topography of green lines across his sight. He opened his eyes. The green projection and the physical world meshed. Status runes began to flash across his cockpit systems.

'All flight units,' he said, keying his vox. 'Flight readiness complete. On the count, brothers.'

Numerals cycled down at the edge of his vision. The metal cavern wall began to slide down into the floor as the outer blast doors opened. Pulses of red light flared in the dark opening beyond as the light of battle beckoned. Snow and ash billowed in. Volk fed power to his craft's thrusters. 786-1-1 rose from the cavern floor. It rocked in the gusting wind. Volk compensated without needing to think.

Across the cavern, sixty-four other war machines began to lift from their stations – trios of Xiphon interceptors, Fire Raptors and Lightning Crows, all of them liveried in bare steel. It was still enough to be called a Grand Flight. Just enough. All of them would go into the air light by half of the payload required for the mission. Their ammo hoppers were almost empty, their lascannon capacitors barely charged, their fuel at the lowest margin possible for mission completion. Less than a decade before, going to war like this would have been unthinkable. Not now, though… Now they were warriors starving for the means to make war.

'*786-1-2 standing by,*' said the voice of Zarrak over the vox. Volk keyed a non-verbal acknowledgement to his wingman.

'*A little grim tonight, brother?*' The metallic rasp of Zarrak's ruined voice could not hide the goading amusement in the words. Volk ignored it, though he felt his lips twitch into the shadow of a smile.

'Mission patterns locked in,' said Volk into the vox. 'Onyx command, this is flight seven-eight-six, awaiting clearance.'

Static hissed in his ears for a second. The diminishing count was racing down to zero.

‘*Flight seven-eight-six, you are cleared for launch,*’ came the voice of the officer. The man would be watching the data from Volk’s flight and matching it against the myriad other operations around the Onyx fortress. To that human, the war for Krade would only ever be numbers and signals shunting across his senses. Volk struggled to feel anything but loathing for such an existence.

‘*Iron within,*’ said the officer.

‘Iron without,’ replied Volk, and switched to the flight vox. ‘All weapons live.’

Amber weapon runes flashed to green. Shackled power built in 786-1-1’s engines. The strike fighter was shaking around him as the thrusters fought to hold it in place.

The count hit zero.

786-1-1 shot forwards. Force slammed into Volk. Air gasped from his lungs. The wall of night and swirling snow raced to meet him, and then he was out, rising into the black sky. Behind him, his squadron brothers were flowing from the open cavern mouth, afterburners streaks of blue fire.

Alerts began to scream as enemy targeting systems locked on to him. Tracer rounds and explosions boiled the night beyond the canopy. He triggered countermeasures. Flares and auspex lures scattered in 786-1-1’s wake. Volk slammed the strike fighter into a climbing spiral. His wingman followed him, holding in perfect formation. The rest of the Grand Flight scattered into the air from the hangar mouth, wheeling as fire reached for them. Beneath them, the Onyx mountain range extended away to the sky. Explosions pulsed across the ground, staining the underside of the clouds. Batteries dug into the mountain flanks blazed. Small-arms fire sparkled in a sea of light.

Krade was a world on the boundary between the Warmaster’s domain and the vengeful wrath of Ultramar. The warp storms that had for so long split the galaxy had guttered. The screaming tides that had blinded the Ultima Segmentum had dispersed and with its ebb, the anger of Roboute Guilliman, and every scrap of might he could call on, had begun to move in the storm’s wake. The Shadow Crusade of Lorgar and Angron had wounded them, and the predations of the Night Haunter had bled them. But the Lord of Macragge had endured, and now his sons came in vengeance. Worlds

held in the Warmaster's name had come under attack – some had fallen, and the loyalty of others had begun to waver. All the while, words and rumours had come from the galactic south, first in whispers then in scattered reports, of retreat and disaster: the warriors of the XIII were coming.

Across the path of this rising tide, the Iron Warriors stood. Worlds were burned, fortified or reinforced. Traps were laid in the path of the enemy. For every advance they made, the forces of the False Emperor paid and paid again. But advance they did.

Remnants of Imperial Army conquest-echelons, Mechanicum Taghmata, rogue trader households, landless Knights and the shattered remnants of Legions thought broken at Isstvan V – all fought in the armies marshalled by the Ultramarines. They fought with discipline and a unity of purpose, and that purpose was retribution. Against them the Lord of Iron stood, unbreaking, never tiring, holding the line while the Warmaster opened the path to Terra.

Krade was a keystone in that line, a world that controlled a system, and from that system projected power into other systems, without which the enemy could divide and slaughter. It had to hold, and hold it had for sixth months. Volk had been there since Perturabo had planted his banner on Krade's northern mountains. He had watched as the pressure on the defences grew in the void, on the ground and in the sky. So far, the Ultramarines themselves had not reached Krade in force, but they would, and then the real fight would begin.

Volk was iron in blood and bone. He would fight until there was nothing left for him to fight with, and then still fight on. But sometimes, in the first moments of battle, he wondered if there was victory waiting for them.

'*Incoming enemy interceptors,*' called Zarrak.

Volk slammed the strike fighter into a spin before the auspex began to shriek the lock warning. Red runes flowed across his display. A stutter of autocannon fire lit up the night.

'*Breaking left!*' shouted Zarrak.

Volk pulled 786-1-1 out of its spiral and flooded power to the engines. Fuel warnings pulsed to amber. He rose, feeling the acceleration punch him with bone-breaking force. He did not have the time or fuel for an air duel. In his half-machine sight, he could see that his flight was with him, each craft following its own weaving path as munitions exploded in their wake. The enemy were there too, pairs of red markers converging from below and

above. They would outrun them, though. Volk had seen and run the calculations; his forces would reach their objective. They would succeed.

‘*What–*’ called Zarrak across the vox, and then cut out.

Volk’s auspex fuzzed, static squawked.

A missile plunged down from the cloud layer above them and struck Volk’s wingman. Fire roared out. Volk twitched aside on instinct as a pulse of las-fire burned through the space where he had been.

A shape was falling from the dark clouds about him. The night had stolen the colours from its wings, but even in the split-second glimpse he caught, Volk recognised it. It was a Xiphon-pattern interceptor, kin to those that flew under his command. It was a predator of the skies, designed to kill its own kind. And it was not a machine that could be flown by human hands.

Volk rolled. Lascannon bolts kissed the air he passed through. Warning alarms were screaming in his ears. The vox was a static-ruined squall of signals as the rest of the flight met the enemy descending on them.

Volk blinked the automatic targeting system off as he kept rolling.

The enemy interceptor was plunging down at him like a dagger, its lascannons turning the night to strobing day. Volk triggered a burst from his thrusters. His roll stopped dead. The manual targeting rune centred on the interceptor for an instant. He touched the fire stud. A single pulse of white brilliance lanced out from his wings. It was a shot that no mortal could have made and few amongst the Legions would ever have attempted. It struck the enemy interceptor’s tail and vaporised it.

Volk had two heartbeats to watch the burning craft tumble past him. In those brief moments – while half of his awareness was marking the position of the rest of his flight and their opponents – he saw the colours of his enemy lit by the fires of its death.

Blue.

Sapphire-blue. The colour of the sea under the sun at noon. And on its wings, the symbol of Ultramar painted in stark white.

So, they are here, thought Volk.

He keyed the vox.

‘Onyx command, this is 786-1-1. Priority alert to all command echelon.’

His hands moved, and the fighter banked and cut down through the night towards where his brothers spun above the battle-lit land.

‘*Go ahead, 786-1-1,*’ said a voice that was too deep to be human.

‘Forces of the Thirteenth are in the battle space,’ he said. Beneath him, he saw a flash of white fire. A green marker blinked out on the flight status display. ‘The Ultramarines are here.’

Horus the Warmaster, injured upon his throne

TWO

Maloghurst

‘It is the Warmaster’s command,’ said Maloghurst. The ghost image of Mortarion shimmered in the air above the burning body of the metatron. The Death Lord’s eyes were hollows above his high gorget. Fumes hissed from the vents in his armour. Looking at him, Maloghurst felt his skin prickle and sweat. On the floor, the splayed body of the metatron twitched. Blisters bubbled across its flesh. It would not survive the audience; a waste, but that could not be helped.

The warp had gifted Horus’ forces with many things, not least of which were means of navigating and communicating across the vast distances of space. While they still used Navigators to guide most of their ships, and astropaths to send messages between dispersed forces, the subtle arts and secrets had given them greater precision than those still loyal to the Emperor could ever dream of. Through the binding of souls and the entreating of daemons, they could bring ships through storms that would break the mightiest of fleets. They could speak as though they were standing in the same chamber while half a galaxy away. But, like all powers that involved the denizens of the warp, there was a price – a truth the metatrons exemplified.

All of them had once been astropaths, before their minds and souls had been split by sorcery and their souls conjoined with creatures of the warp. Through them, the voice of the Warmaster could be heard by his servants as long as they also had a metatron. But that connection cost blood and lives. In many cases the creatures would not survive fulfilling their purpose. Maloghurst had already burned through three of his metatrons in the course of a single night.

‘*If it is the Warmaster’s will then he can speak it to me with his own tongue,*’ said Mortarion. The primarch of the Death Guard was leaning on

his scythe, his armour shifting as he breathed.

‘I am the Warmaster’s voice, and you will heed me.’

‘*You are a mouth that opens but makes no sound, Twisted One.*’

‘He trusts and values you above all, lord. This honour is one that he would give to no other, and he would see no other claim it from you.’

‘*Yet he does not do me the honour of telling me that I will be the first to fling my Legion at Dorn’s walls. You are a flatterer, Maloghurst, but that can only be called an honour when the command comes from the master, not his dog.*’

‘You will do this, Mortarion. He orders it so.’

‘*Then he can order me to see it done.*’

The scythe spun and cut so swiftly that Maloghurst could see it only as a blur. The image vanished. The reek of sulphur and burning sugar rolled through the air. On the floor, the metatron writhed, flesh splitting. Blood gushed from the blind creature’s mouth. A high, keening wail rose in Maloghurst’s mind. He held his gaze on the empty air for a second, then drew and fired his boltgun. Blood and bone sprayed out. Silence settled in the reeking air.

‘To waste such material so freely…’ came a purring voice from behind him. ‘That says something.’

Maloghurst turned, pistol rising, his eyes finding their target in a fraction of a heartbeat. Twisted he might be, but his flesh was still transhuman. He stopped, finger hovering over the trigger.

‘What does it say?’ he asked.

Nine lenses looked back at Maloghurst from beneath a black cowl. They rotated slowly as he held his aim and trigger finger steady.

‘Maybe it says that you are merciful,’ said the voice. It was female, sibilant and wet-edged.

‘How did you get in?’ he said slowly.

The figure drifted silently closer. It was tall, or rather it seemed as though something tall had been folded under the swathes of fabric. Maloghurst’s armour tingled with static as he looked at it. He held his aim.

‘Maybe it says that you are angered.’

‘You will comply, Sota-Nul, or I will rip you apart and have what remains fed to the Luperci.’

‘Maybe it says that you are cruel.’

His finger pulled tense. Inside the casing of his bolt pistol, the firing mechanism was poised on the edge of ignition.

‘It says that if something is of no use, I am willing to discard it.’

Sota-Nul tilted her head.

‘Is that so? I will record that fact for truth analysis.’ Despite all he knew of her, it was always Sota-Nul’s voice that made him want to burn her where she stood. It was not like most tech-priests’: too emotive, too… fleshy.

‘How did you enter these chambers?’ he growled.

‘As the representative of the Fabricator General, I pass where I may.’

‘Not on this ship.’

‘Wherever the wheel turns, so may I go.’ The tech-witch tilted her head briefly. ‘Though if my intrusion has caused you emotional discomfort, I tender those apologies that will cause your humours to rebalance.’

Maloghurst lowered his weapon. He took a careful breath and forced his mind to stillness. Anger had its uses – all emotion had its uses – but no matter how much his instincts told him to shoot the tech-witch, he could not listen to them. Sota-Nul was a disciple of Kelbor-Hal, Fabricator General of the new Mechanicum. Maloghurst was not sure what she was – human, machine or neither – but he could taste the warpcraft threaded through her. Just as he was Horus’ equerry, so Sota-Nul was Kelbor-Hal’s factotum at the court of the Warmaster. He could no more shoot her than she could kill him. If either tried and failed, they would be starting a second civil war while the first was still burning. One day that war might have to be fought but not before Kelbor-Hal and his Dark Mechanicum had helped set Horus on the Throne of Terra.

‘What do you want?’ he asked.

‘Horus has not left his sanctum chambers for thirty-eight days.’

Behind his still face, Maloghurst’s mind saw all of the thousands of servitors that moved through the *Vengeful Spirit*, all of the mechanical systems that layered its bones. It was tempting to think of them as uncaring of what they saw, but such a thought would be a mistake. They saw, and they answered to the Mechanicum.

‘That is not a matter that concerns you.’

‘That is incorrect. It concerns us. The magnitude of our concern is significant.’

‘The Warmaster is preoccupied with plans for the next stages of the war. You have seen the orders that he has issued.’

‘That you issued, equerry.’

‘The Warmaster prepares for the next great phase of battle. His preparations will not be disturbed. I speak for him.’

Sota-Nul rotated her cowl towards where the remains of the metatron lay congealing and smoking on the floor of the deck.

‘Your words are incomplete in truth value. I hereby register our displeasure at your response and transmit a request that the Warmaster convene directly and personally with the Fabricator General.’

‘I will convey your message and displeasure to the Warmaster,’ he said. ‘And now you will leave me to my work.’ He met her nine-fold gaze and gave a single shake of his head. ‘This audience is over, and you will not attend on me so again.’

For a second the tech-witch did not move, but then she rotated and began to drift into the dark that hid the distant entrance to the chamber.

‘The allies of the Warmaster are not blind, Maloghurst. You should be…’ Sota-Nul paused, and Maloghurst had the impression that she was searching for the word that would come next. ‘Concerned.’

‘I am…’ he breathed to himself as he heard the door reseal behind her. ‘I am.’

Layak

The *Trisagion* and the *Vengeful Spirit* met in the gulf between stars amongst the corpses of dead warships. Squadrons of battle cruisers flanked the Warmaster’s flagship. Hundreds of destroyers and frigates moved amongst them, darting like small fish around leviathans, guns armed and ready, auspex systems sweeping the debris-scattered dark.

The Word Bearers fleet approached slowly, its lesser warships holding in tight formations as they broadcast litanies of praise and supplication. Their weapons remained cold, their auspex and targeting systems silent, their void shields deactivated.

The Sons of Horus ships spread out around them, enclosing them, riding in close station, so close that their fire would strike before it was sensed by their targets. The Word Bearers held course. A blizzard of signals crossed the gap between the fleets. Identification markers were verified and code

ciphers swapped and checked. The drone of the Word Bearers greeting ached in the background of every vox signal.

‘*Glory undivided. Glory to Horus Lupercal, exalted and most high. Glory to the anointed of the gods. Glory…*’

On the words went in a waterfall of voices.

The Word Bearers halted within fifty kilometres of the *Vengeful Spirit*. The lesser void-craft shifted position, folding back into the formation of an eight-pointed star. Thrusters fired across the fleet, burning yellow in the dark as they came to a dead halt.

Only the *Trisagion* glided on, like a queen shedding her courtiers as she approached the throne of an empress. The Sons of Horus held back, letting her pass unescorted. Thrusters began to fire along her length, each blast scattering the ashes of a thousand slaves that had been herded into the engine vents to bless this meeting with their ends. The *Trisagion* halted at last and lay still, prow to prow with the *Vengeful Spirit*, the two separated by little more than a kilometre. There they lay for a long moment, two goddesses of devastation, alike in size and power but little else.

A single Stormbird launched from the *Trisagion*’s prow hangar bays and thrust towards the *Vengeful Spirit.* Within its hull, Zardu Layak sat in the red-soaked gloom. Silence rolled through the vibrating air. Forty warriors of his Chapter of the Unspeaking filled the benches, their crimson armour powdered with ashes. Tapers bearing sacred symbols hung from their pauldrons. These were the Thrice Born, the chosen of his command. Their severed tongues, set in amber and threaded on strings woven from human hair, hung around their necks. His two blade slaves, Kulnar and Hebek, sat to either side of Layak, so still that they seemed sculptures. Only the black iron and gold hilts of the swords at their waists set them apart from the rest.

Lorgar stood at the far end of the cabin, head bowed, his eyes closed. The air around him shimmered in time with his silent prayers.

Layak felt the Stormbird decelerate and saw the primarch lift his head and open his eyes. A clang shivered through the gunship as its landing feet settled onto the deck. Layak stood, and as one the Unspeaking rose with him. The front assault ramp released with a hiss. Lorgar glanced over his shoulder.

‘The gods walk with us,’ he said.

‘And their will is our strength.’

The ramp opened wide. Lorgar walked down into the light beyond.

Layak followed ten paces behind, his staff tapping in time with his steps. His slaves and brothers followed in his wake.

The hangar was empty of vehicles besides Lorgar's Stormbird, the vast chamber running away to darkness. Sons of Horus filled that space, ranked in rows and squares, red eyes glowing from storm-green armour. Banners hung above them, all marked with the unblinking Eye of Horus woven in gold, silver and copper on black. Behind them stood the creatures of the Mechanicum, dark-robed and hunched, and beyond them were human soldiers, thousands of them, their faces lost to distance and shadow.

False thunder rolled as the assembled warriors came to attention as one. Lorgar paused and bowed his head for a single second.

Three Legion warriors waited in a loose group before them. Layak knew them all by sight and reputation: Falkus Kibre, looming in obsidian Cataphractii plate; Horus Aximand, his flayed and rebonded face a mask; and, at the centre, Maloghurst. The equerry to the Warmaster stooped beneath a bronze staff topped with a golden Eye of Horus. In the symbol-laced vision of his mask-helm, he saw Maloghurst's aura ripple and billow like a tattered shroud.

Whispers itched in Layak's ears. *+Khak'akaoz'khyshk'akami, Q'tlashsi'isso'akshami, Bahk'ghuranhi'aghkami.+*

He could see life force bleeding out of the equerry, even as the power of the souls fumed from him.

Powerful, Layak thought. *Powerful in every sense.*

'Honoured Lord Aurelian,' said Maloghurst. Aximand and Kibre bowed their heads briefly. Layak noted the subtle observance of power, authority and formality. The sceptre in Maloghurst's hand meant that he represented Horus in this moment. He spoke with the Warmaster's voice and as such did not show deference to the primarch of the Word Bearers.

Lorgar smiled.

'Maloghurst and two of the Mournival, you do me high honour.' The words were serene, and the warmth of sincerity rang clear.

'The honour is ours,' said Maloghurst.

'The Beta-Garmon front is broken. The way to Terra is open, and the victory of truth is at hand. Yours is the hour. The gods know your names, and you are raised high by your deeds.'

Aximand's sword wound of a mouth opened to speak, but Maloghurst spoke before he could.

‘There is much to discuss. Please let us make you and your warriors welcome.’

‘My thanks. Please, lead on.’

Maloghurst nodded and turned. Lorgar fell in at his side. Aximand and Kibre followed beside Layak. His two blade slaves held back, just a step behind. Layak felt the hooks on the inside of his mask dig deeper into his flesh as the warriors passed into the body of the *Vengeful Spirit*. The warp threaded its chambers and halls. It was already crawling through the bones of the ship. Half-born daemons scuttled at the edge of sight. The gods themselves had walked these decks and now watched from the shadows. That was good – it would make it easier to plant the seeds that he had to.

‘I hope that my brother will be able to receive me as soon as whatever matter delays him is resolved,’ said Lorgar smoothly as they entered one of the ship’s main arterial passages.

‘Of course,’ said Maloghurst without hesitation.

The buzz of active power armour and the tramp of armoured feet filled the moment that followed the lie.

‘If I may, Lord Aurelian,’ rasped Maloghurst. ‘While we are glad of your coming, this meeting was not expected.’

‘Does the meeting of kin and brothers need to be heralded? We are on the cusp of victory, Maloghurst. A victory that we all have fought to bring about. We must draw together in this moment, would you not say?’

‘Indeed. Messages were sent by the will of the Warmaster to that end, but they did not call you or your Legion here. The summons was to Ullanor.’

‘Messages? I am afraid that the gods have not brought your words to me, but the winds of eternity guided me here, where I am needed.’ Lorgar glanced down at Maloghurst. ‘I *am* needed here, am I not, Mal?’

Maloghurst’s face showed nothing, but the vision of him in Layak’s mask flexed and shimmered.

‘You are always welcome in the court of the Warmaster,’ said Maloghurst.

‘In his court? What must a brother dream to wake and find his brother a king?’ Maloghurst started to reply, but Lorgar raised a placating hand. ‘I will not speak of it here, but I must see Horus. For the victory that will be ours, I must see him.’ He paused again and let the quiet settle. Layak almost smiled. The primarch’s words were the perfect balance of strength, sincerity

and humility. They tugged at the thoughts and humours like the fingers of a divine musician. ‘I am here to help, and I *can* help.’

Maloghurst’s face remained fixed as they walked. The shadows and silence seemed to hold their breath.

‘The Warmaster appreciates your service,’ he said at last.

Lorgar gave a sad smile.

‘And I live to serve,’ he said.

Volk

Volk spun the Lightning Crow low. The wall of the mountainside rose to meet him, its black mass swallowing the sky beyond. Fire licked the air around him. Ground units opened up as he passed low over the crags and valleys. He could see the teeth of the crenellated towers that capped the hills and the sloped fronts of the defence lines running down the mountain’s flanks.

His helmet display was a blur of red warnings – threat markers, fuel status, ammunition status and communications integrity. Out across the mountainside the rest of his flight followed his lead, tumbling low to hug the ground as they ran back to the mountain’s shelter. He felt hard rounds and pulses of las-bolts slam into his wings. More red in his eyes.

‘*Commander, enemy emerging on your tail,*’ called his new wingman. Behind him the axe-blade shape of a Lightning in jagged red-and-yellow livery roared up from where it had been clinging to the other side of a stone ridge. Volk tumbled 786-1-1 over as lascannon fire burned past him.

He could see the entrance to the hangar cavern, close but still seconds away, seconds that he might not have.

Too far away, he thought. *Too far by a long way.*

The Lightning was burning close on his tail. The target lock warning was rising in pitch.

Volk triggered his forward thrusters. 786-1-1 flipped over. The force emptied the air from all three of his lungs. Blood drained from his head and limbs. The fuel warning joined the chorus of alarms. The Lightning held tight on his tail. Its pilot was good, very good even, perhaps one of those serving the Rogue Traders Martial that the Ultramarines had brought in to break the Iron Warriors at Krade. Lascannon fire burned after Volk as he dived lower. The mountainside was so close he felt as though he could reach through his canopy and touch it.

‘Stay with me,’ he hissed through clenched teeth. ‘Stay with me.’

A whip-crack of las skimmed the tip of his left tail fin. The Lightning Crow bucked as though stung.

A cliff of sheer black glass running across the mouth of a valley rose to meet him.

‘Stay with me…’

The Lightning was close, hugging as tightly as a shadow.

‘Closer…’

The cliff was a black wall.

And for a moment the blackness before him and the scream of engines and the promise of death in his hands was everything, was the universe.

The Lightning fired.

Volk slammed 786-1-1 vertical, poured the last of its fuel into its engines and roared over the cliff edge. The Lightning followed, its own engines burning blue with heat.

Two sets of turrets positioned on the top of the cliff swung up and fired. Four quad autocannons spat solid shots into the air. Explosive rounds streamed past Volk and tore the Lightning from the sky.

Volk watched as the hangar cavern yawned wide in front of him. The defence turrets twitched back to stillness as he entered. 786-1-1 settled onto its landing pad just as a final alarm sounded to say that the last of his fuel was gone.

Volk snapped free of his connection to the craft before its power had finished cycling down. His helmet hissed free. The smell of fuel and machine oil flooded his nose. He vaulted out of the cockpit as the canopy began to rise.

‘You look like a man with somewhere else he wants to be, commander.’ The voice made him turn. He kept his surprise from his face. The anger made that easier.

First Captain Forrix stood at the edge of the landing pad. The bulk of his Terminator armour made his sallow face seem shrunken in its collar socket. Dark eyes glittered above a thin smile.

Volk did not answer. In truth he wanted to, but the reply that came to mind was not one to be said aloud to one of the Lord of Iron’s closest lieutenants. He stilled his thoughts. His nerves were still singing with the scream of weapon locks and the slam of G-force. Aggression and kill instinct held the beat of his hearts. He paused as a trio of servitors crowded

around him to fix a power pack to his back. A weapon serf in black robes and a blank, wrought-iron mask held up his bolter. The man's arms barely trembled as they braced to take the weight. Volk took it, racked the arming mechanism and clamped it to his thigh plate. When he was done, he finally looked up at Forrix, bowed his head briefly and made to turn towards where the rest of his flight were emerging from their craft.

'Something vexes you?' said Forrix.

Volk turned, opened his mouth and closed it again.

'Nothing that needs to be said here,' he said carefully, inclining his head to the nearest serfs and Iron Warriors.

Forrix looked at them and turned to move away.

'Follow,' he said.

Volk stayed still for a second, then walked after the First Captain. They passed out of the cavern and into the main mass of the mountain fortress. Moisture dripped from the smooth walls of the tunnels they passed through. Servitors, human soldiers and serfs parted for them as they walked. Blast doors opened, and they descended in lift cages down shafts braced with rusting metal.

The Onyx Mountain had been just a mountain before the coming of the Iron Warriors. Mines had run through the mountain's bones, but within a week a warren of tunnels had been dug down to its root and up to its summit. Sub-fortresses and walls had been hacked into its flanks, and stores gouged into its heart. In a week. Such was the art of the IV and the Lord of Iron.

'You are concerned that you are being censured further,' said Forrix as they exited a macro lift into a plasteel-lined passage. Volk looked up as gun mounts in the ceiling swung around and aimed at them. Targeting beams sparkled over his armour. The guns cycled down after a heartbeat. 'This is not censure, though you may deserve it.'

'For what?'

'For weakness, of course.'

'Whatever the lord primarch wishes of me, I shall do,' he said. Forrix shot him a hard look. 'If he wishes my death by my own hand, he need only command it. The iron of my blood is his.'

The First Captain's eyes narrowed.

'Not all iron is forged alike,' he said. Before them the tunnel ended in a door of yellow-and-black striped metal. A pair of towering figures flanked

the portal. Shields the size of tank turrets hung from piston-driven hands, and vast hammers rested in their grips. Cold green light glimmered in their eye sockets as shoulder-mounted cannons rotated to track Forrix and Volk. These were the automata of the Iron Circle, machines crafted by Perturabo's own hand to be his bodyguard, and their presence removed any doubt as to who he was being led to.

'From Faith cometh Honour,' said Volk.

Forrix's gaze was icy.

Vast mechanisms clanked within the doors. Layers of metal peeled back one at a time until the way was open to the space beyond. After a second they walked through. The light of pict screens and holo-displays diluted the darkness within. Banks of machines and tiers of servitors wired into data cradles surrounded a central circular recess. Numerals and symbols scrolled without cease across the glowing screens and holo projections. At their centre, bathed in the cold light, stood Perturabo. Four Iron Circle automata stood around him, facing outwards, graven statues guarding a demigod of war.

The primarch of the Iron Warriors did not look around as Forrix and Volk approached. Volk had not been in the presence of his primarch for months, not since the withdrawal from Tallarn; not since Volk's censure for failing to confine Horus' emissary. Perturabo had changed in that time. The bulk of his armour had grown. Bracing, armour plates and, above all, weapon systems had multiplied across his shoulders and limbs. The armour had a cold sheen to it, as though the metal were sweating a thin film of dark oil. His face was pale, the skin seemingly drawn over the skull beneath, the eyes points of reflected light in pits of shadow. He had been that way ever since he had come from out of the Black Sun, as though something vital had been drained from him and what remained was being ground down to a sharp edge.

'Kneel,' said Perturabo, without turning.

Volk knelt and bowed his head. Behind him the blast doors ground closed. Forrix remained standing a step behind him. He heard the primarch turn. He shivered inside his armour, nerves pricking. Perturabo was looking at him. He could feel it. It was like the moment an enemy weapon system locked on to you, and you could feel death in the scream of the sensor systems.

‘The emissary called Argonis…’ said the primarch. Volk heard the name and wondered why Forrix had lied. This was about his failure on Tallarn. This was about censure. ‘You know him.’

Volk swallowed in a dry throat, his mind whirling. Argonis was one of the Sons of Horus, a war chieftain of the XVI Legion during the Great Crusade. He was Cthonian born, ruthless, brutal, direct and the finest pilot Volk had ever seen. They had shared command of the air elements in three campaigns as part of the Keltius Conquest Fleet. They had trained together, fought together and killed together – if such bonds could exist between legionaries of different blood, they had been friends. That had been before the Warmaster had begun the war against the Emperor, before the massacre of Legions and the burning of the past. They had met once since, on Tallarn. It had been a reunion that had resulted in Volk’s censure.

‘I fought with him, my lord,’ said Volk. ‘I know him.’

‘He will trust you?’

Volk thought of Argonis grinning his rare, wolf’s grin.

‘Perhaps, lord.’

‘And you – do you trust him?’

‘No,’ said Volk without hesitation.

‘Why?’

‘You should never trust a sword that is too sharp, lord.’

‘Just so,’ said Perturabo. ‘And would you attempt to renew your bonds of brotherhood at my command?’

‘Of course, my lord.’

‘And be his shadow so that you would know his thoughts and motives?’

‘Yes, lord.’

‘And at the will of your lord, knowing that he was the representative of the Warmaster, would you take his life?’

Volk saw again the target rune blink red over the image of Argonis’ Storm Eagle as it rose above the curve of Tallarn’s sphere. Was this a trick or a trap? Was he condemning himself to further punishment? To death?

I am iron, he thought, *and iron is truth.*

‘Yes,’ he replied. The humming buzz of the data screens filled the silence that followed.

‘Rise,’ said Perturabo.

Volk stood and met the gaze of his primarch. It took all his will not to raise his hands to defend himself, not to run. His instincts screamed that this

was death – death and annihilation looking at him with a gaze as cold as dead stars.

‘Is Argonis returning to us?’ he asked, forcing the words from his lips.

Perturabo gave a single, small, shake of his head. Weapon mounts on his wrists purred as their mechanisms cycled.

‘He is already here, and he brings word from the Warmaster.’

THREE

Maloghurst

‘Sire? Can you hear my voice?’ Maloghurst knelt beneath the throne, at the Warmaster’s feet. His features were a pale sketch in the shadowed collar of his armour. The lights of warships glimmered behind the viewport, brighter than the distant stars.

‘Sire?’ he said again, and the word seemed to drain to silence as it left his lips. The wound in the Warmaster’s side had opened again. Blood dripped from the maw of torn flesh, its slow inhalations sucking the sound from the air as it breathed. Patterns covered the floor around Maloghurst, drawn in ash, salt and blood. Candles burned in stands made from dried human hands and polished skulls. He held a dagger in his left hand, the blade red from the cut it had made in the bare flesh of his right palm. Blood dripped slowly from his fingers. He had been kneeling before the throne for six hours, speaking words, calling up every scrap of power that he had stolen from the warp in the last years, searching for a way to coax even the smallest reaction from Horus. None of it had worked. Occult formulae had drained to nothing, and his calls to the cardinal powers and principals of the warp had been met with silence. It was as though Horus sat at the centre of a vortex, a silent storm that swallowed all strength around it. He had been this way for the last weeks, not moving from the throne, rising to brief moments of lucidity only to lapse back into a silent fugue.

‘Very well,’ he said, shaking his head to himself, feeling fatigue shake down his nerves. ‘Very well…’

He drew and let out a breath. He was out of time. Even with all the power at his command, the ability to continue without sleep and a will that could crush iron, he could not outrun the flow of time. A web of control, of power and responsibility waited for him as soon as he stepped from the throne

room. At this moment, every finely balanced thread of decision and consequence led to him.

It was strange, he thought – so many amongst the Legion and beyond thought of him as a manipulator, as a creature who hoarded and wielded power. And now the power was his, pressing down on him with all its weight, tangling him in its strangling threads. Those who called him ‘the Twisted’ would have thought this circumstance one he would relish. He bent to clear the ritual equipment and felt exhaustion rise through him in a fever wave. Bubbles of colour spun and popped at the edge of his vision. He breathed hard. For all of the strength gifted to him by his gene-crafted body, he could not shake the weariness draining him. It was not natural, he knew that, just as the sleep that overpowered him and the dreams it brought were not natural.

The remains of his arcane work gone, he picked up his sceptre of authority, bowed to the immobile form of Horus and hobbled to the side door. Kibre and four of the Justaerin were waiting.

Maloghurst answered Kibre’s question before it was asked.

‘Just as before.’

Kibre nodded, and the black-armoured Terminators passed into the throne room to stand guard over their silent lord. Kibre paused as he passed Maloghurst.

‘How long can this go on?’

Maloghurst met his gaze. He wondered if the exhaustion showed in his face. He tried to think of a careful answer but none came.

‘I do not know,’ he said.

Kibre held his gaze for a long moment, then turned away and went into the throne room.

Maloghurst walked alone to his own chambers. He used side passages and sealed tunnels, careful to avoid the areas where the petitioners gathered to plead their cases to the Warmaster or offer gifts. Horus rarely received any but the most exalted of his subjects; Maloghurst usually sat in his place. He had kept to that duty in the last weeks – it was vital that no one noticed the slightest pause in the turning of the wheels of power.

But Lorgar… Why was he here? He was a primarch, and all of Maloghurst’s subtlety would not be able to persuade him that everything was well indefinitely. Lorgar knew that something was wrong with Horus; he had practically said that he knew when he had arrived. Maloghurst

wondered which daemon had whispered what to the lord of the Word Bearers, then dismissed the thought. It was irrelevant. He needed to rouse Horus. He needed to understand what malady had fallen on the Warmaster. He needed to–

'Well met.' The voice rumbled from the shadows ahead of him. Maloghurst's gaze snapped up. He reached for the bolt pistol at his waist, even as he cursed himself for allowing his fatigue to blind him to danger. 'There is no need for that,' said Zardu Layak as he stepped into view. 'After all, are we not brothers?'

The darkness peeled back from the Word Bearer, like smoke blown by a wind. Layak's two silent bodyguards stood a stride behind their master, their hands hanging loosely at their sides. Maloghurst felt his skin prickle inside his armour as he looked at the blank eyepieces of their helms. Layak stopped an arm's length from Maloghurst. The two held each other's gaze: the hunched equerry in storm sea-green with the Eye of Horus capping the sceptre in his hand, the Word Bearer in grey, his staff a broken moon clutching a bronze censer. The rows of eyes set in Layak's horned mask-helm glowed like coals.

Maloghurst felt the anger flare brighter in him, blurring with his fatigue. He should be silent, he should bite his tongue.

'You are the guest of the Warmaster,' said Maloghurst, his voice low, 'but if you do that again, I will cut your heart out and throw you into the void with it in your mouth.'

One of Layak's twin guards turned its head to stare at Maloghurst.

Layak did not move for a second, then tilted his head to the side, like a bird watching a snake.

'It's never far beneath the skin with your breed, is it? The ghost of Cthonia waiting to repay words with blood.'

'I knew Lorgar's previous *favourites*,' Maloghurst smiled. 'Ask them.'

'Erebus' error is not one I shall repeat,' said Layak.

Maloghurst kept himself perfectly still. He was being played with, he knew. He did not know why, but whatever game this was he had lost the opening move.

'Return to your quarters,' he said, with careful control, and stepped forwards to walk through the space occupied by Layak and his two companions. For a second, he thought Layak would stand his ground, but then the Word Bearers stepped aside. Maloghurst moved past them.

‘I can help you,’ said Layak from behind him. Maloghurst kept moving. The ploy was obvious now. Layak had been sent by Lorgar to learn what he could about what had happened to Horus. The Word Bearer had provoked him to anger, destabilising his thoughts, making him less cautious, more vulnerable to the true thrust of his purpose. Maloghurst almost smiled at its crudity and kept walking. The ploy had almost worked. He was too tired by far. ‘I can help the Warmaster. I know what malady holds him silent on his throne.’

Maloghurst stopped.

I should not listen, he thought. Never trust – never! Always see the knives in the shadows, the murder in a smile. But… but…

He turned slowly and looked at Layak.

‘That is why Lord Aurelian is here. Why I am here. We know.’

‘There is nothing to know,’ said Maloghurst.

‘No one can hear us, Maloghurst, be not afraid. This is a matter between us alone. We can help.’

‘If what you say is true then Lorgar would have made this… supposition directly on his arrival.’

‘Trust,’ said Layak. ‘He wished to see if you trusted him.’

‘I trust no one.’

‘Then you are wise.’

Maloghurst remained silent. He thought of Erebus, the disgraced High Chaplain of the Word Bearers, of the Davinites and the lore they wielded, and that he had taken from them. He was at the edge of his ability and knowledge, and could see nothing beyond.

‘Tell me what you know,’ he said.

Layak

‘This is not sanctioned, Maloghurst,’ boomed Falkus Kibre as he stepped from the shadows pooling beside the door to Horus’ throne room. Maloghurst turned as hulking figures stepped into sight with a buzzing growl of activating armour. Layak hissed a syllable of power under his breath. Coiling darkness enveloped him. Beside him, Kulnar and Hebek gripped the hilts of their sheathed swords. Cracks spidered across their gauntlets, and red fire glowed from beneath. Only Lorgar did not react. The primarch remained still, looking up at the doors to the throne room, his face impassive.

‘You shall not pass,’ growled Kibre as he stamped forwards. Mirror coins rattled on the plates of his black Terminator armour. Five Justaerin Terminators came with him, eyes red in blank helms. More came from the dark behind them. They had deactivated their armour and stood as silent as statues in the gloom. Layak’s sight pulsed and spun with runes as his helm struggled to grasp the aura of their souls. He should have sensed the presence of the Terminators, but he had not. The closer they had come to the throne room, the less Layak had been able to sense in the Sea of Souls. The whispers of the lesser daemons bound to his will had quieted in his mind, and even his blade slaves had advanced reluctantly. It was as though a storm waited beyond the doors, a storm of such force that its winds stole all sound around it.

‘Do not interfere, Kibre,’ rasped Maloghurst. ‘This is for the Warmaster.’

The Justaerin levelled their weapons. Kibre raised a plasma blaster. A shrill whine cut the air as the charge reached a peak. Layak could see the shackled rage that burned at the core of Kibre’s soul. It was a crimson cloak rippling as it dragged behind him. He was afraid, Layak realised – not in the way that mortals were but in the way that even the strongest fortress could be shaken if the ground beneath it cracked.

Good, he thought. *The seeds begin to bloom.*

‘You dare threaten–’ began Maloghurst.

‘I protect the Warmaster,’ boomed Kibre. ‘Who are you serving, brother? What words have they whispered to you? What lies have they paid you with?’

Maloghurst’s face pulled taut over his skull. His crooked hands shifted on his staff of authority. Control radiated from the small movement. Layak found himself thinking that of the two, the hulking warrior in black and the hunched equerry, he knew who was the more dangerous.

‘Peace.’ The word was low but fell like the blow of a hammer. Kibre’s gaze jerked up. The aim of the Justaerin faltered. ‘We are brothers,’ said Lorgar. ‘We are warriors in one cause, and of one mind. Noble Falkus, there is no danger here for you to protect your lord from. Your devotion does the Warmaster honour.’ Lorgar stepped towards the Justaerin commander. Kibre’s plasma blaster lowered. The primarch looked down at the Terminator. ‘I only wished to see my Warmaster before I departed. Maloghurst has broken no vow, and I will not ask you to break your oath of protection. Let there be no division here.’

Layak could feel the force of the words. It was not like the power of sorcery or the manipulation of a trickster. It was as if the universe reformed around them, as though they were truth and creation.

Lorgar looked around at the Justaerin. His serene gaze touched them, and their guns lowered, just as their master's had.

'Would that all the warriors of the Warmaster were as you are. You humble us all.'

He bowed his head briefly. And then, incredibly, the black-armoured Terminators knelt.

Maloghurst and Kibre had not moved, but Lorgar turned to them.

'I came to serve the Warmaster's will, to help. I would ask how I can do that, but I feel I know what best can be done. Horus called for us to gather at Ullanor. It shall be as he commanded. But there are those who will not answer the call. Curze in his pit of bones and self-pity. Angron, elevated by the gods, hears nothing besides the call of sacred slaughter. And Fulgrim… Where is he now?'

Maloghurst gripped his staff, as though steadying himself. He sucked a breath. Ragged shadows billowed and frayed around him.

'Messages and emissaries have been sent.'

'Words that cannot be heard,' said Lorgar lightly, 'messages that will go unheeded. If you want my lost brothers to answer, then you must send the others to bring them back. You must send primarchs to treat with primarchs.' Maloghurst was silent for a second and then nodded. Lorgar gave a brief smile and continued. 'Perturabo… He will obey.'

'I have already sent an emissary to him,' said Maloghurst.

'Then contact that emissary – you have the means, I know.'

'And send him where? He and Fulgrim–'

'No, not Fulgrim,' said Lorgar. 'Angron. Only iron can shackle my exalted brother now.'

'Curze?'

'Is Alpharius still paying you the courtesy of taking commands?'

Maloghurst shook his head.

'He is being put to other use.'

'Then perhaps Konrad is beyond reach, or hope, already. I have long feared that inevitability.'

'I have sent emissaries to his last-known location,' said Maloghurst.

‘No one you care for, I hope,’ said Lorgar. Maloghurst gave a hunch-shouldered shrug.

‘And what of Fulgrim?’ asked the equerry. ‘Even his own Legion has not seen him since he went into the rift beyond Cadia.’

‘The Eye of Terror, that is what Perturabo calls it. The realm of the gods and their angels, and only the shriven do not fear to tread there.’ Lorgar paused and brought his open palm to his chest. The polished steel and crimson lacquer of his gauntlet gleamed in the scraps of light. ‘I shall find Fulgrim and bring him to Ullanor. You have my oath.’

Maloghurst, for the first time since Lorgar had come aboard, bowed his head.

‘You have my thanks, Lord Aurelian, for your knowledge, wisdom and loyalty.’

Lorgar’s face remained unmoving.

‘It is all that I can give. Guard our Warmaster. We shall meet again at Ullanor.’ Then he turned from the still-closed doors of the throne room and walked away. Around him, the kneeling Justaerin stood. Layak was still a moment longer, holding Kibre and Maloghurst steady in his sight.

Volk

‘Deliver your message, emissary,’ said Perturabo as Volk entered the Oculum.

The dawn light was cutting across the mountaintops beyond the crystal windows of the summit fastness. This was the highest point of the fortress the Legion had gouged into the Onyx Mountain. Brushed adamantine girders held together a dome of metre-thick crystal panels. The floor was the stone of the mountain, sliced through and ground down to a mirror finish. Light shone through the dome and reflected off the grey floor in multicoloured beams. Volk had never been here but knew that it had been designed by the Lord of Iron himself. Its reality surprised him; it was sublime. Even the oily crackle of void shields and the smoke rising from the burning mountain flanks seemed transmuted into something that felt divine, as though to stand here were to look down on reality like one of the false gods of ancient legend.

The Oculum’s maker seemed out of place in its splendour, a blunt intrusion of metal and menace into serenity. The arming mechanisms of his

weapons clicked and cycled like twitching muscles. Power arced up and down focusing coils.

Argonis the Unscarred, emissary of the Warmaster, turned towards them. His head was bare, his sharp features clean and unmarked. A crimson cloak hung over the right shoulder of his black-and-green armour. He held his red-plumed helm under his left arm, and his right held an ebony staff topped with the Eye of Horus wrought in gold. The blood-topaz at its centre gleamed like a hot coal. Argonis' dark eyes met Perturabo's gaze and held it, unblinking.

'I speak the Warmaster's will,' he said, his voice level. 'This is not a message. I bring a command that you will heed.'

Perturabo was silent for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was a low rasp of control.

'Speak,' he said.

Argonis' eyes flicked to Volk, then back to the primarch.

'Horus, Saviour and Master of Mankind, commands you, Perturabo, Lord of the Fourth Legion, to seek your brother Angron and by any means bring him, and his Legion, to muster on Ullanor. This to be done with all haste, by his authority, using all methods and abstaining from no cost.' Argonis clamped his helm to his belt, reached beneath his cloak and removed a black glass scroll-cylinder, its ends capped with silver. He held it out. 'Accept the writ of Horus' will from my hand.'

'*Master* of Mankind…' said Perturabo, carefully. '*Warmaster*. Lupercal. Brother. Those titles that once were enough. What of the things that drove us to war, emissary? What of the use that we were put to by our faithless father? What of the broken bonds and betrayals?' Volk held perfectly still. His skin was prickling inside his armour. Perturabo was a statue, every part of his great form motionless and silent, save his shrunken lips moving beneath his black gaze. 'I read the tides of battle for sector upon sector, and I read of warriors of iron fighting as their weapons fail for want of bullets, of my sons dragged down in the mire of Guilliman's advance. I look out on the realm we are fighting for, and I see only ashes. And now we are come to this – commands for us to bleed on further, wrapped in full form and formality, given by beggars to lords.'

'Do you refuse this command?' asked Argonis, still offering the scroll-cylinder.

‘Do I refuse?’ said Perturabo, and his voice was a roll of thunder in the bright air. ‘My Legion bleeds. We bleed for our oaths and loyalty. On a hundred worlds we bleed and do not break. Do I refuse? My answer is written in the blood of the dead, in the iron of their veins poured into the mud as we do the will of the Warmaster. Do I refuse? No, emissary, but I feel the weight of the butcher’s bill you hand to me.’

Perturabo took the scroll case, opened it and read the parchment with a glance.

‘Forrix,’ he said softly, his eyes fixed on the words inked on the scroll in his hand. ‘Prepare messages to Kreoger at Jannik, and Toramino on Cassus. Vull Bron is to assume command here. All theatres begin the syphon and transport of forces through Beta-Garmon to muster at Ullanor. No sudden withdrawal. They must give no ground. Those who must remain will make Guilliman’s by-blows pay. This order is to be cascaded without flaw. Order the *Iron Blood* and the Grand Fleet into close orbit, and prepare the First Grand Company for full embarkation and translation out of this system within twenty-four hours under my command.’

‘Yes, lord,’ said Forrix without pause. ‘The defences here and across all of the theatres, from here to the Sulnarn Gap, will degrade by forty-five per cent at least. We will take heavy casualties, both to hold the line and to run the blockades on the warp nodes. The effective strength that we can transport to Ullanor will be–’

‘I know,’ Perturabo said, and he turned his head from the order parchment to look at the First Captain. ‘Give the orders.’

Forrix moved away. Volk remained still, stunned.

‘Speak your question, commander,’ said Perturabo without looking at Volk.

‘What you have just ordered will lose worlds that we have fought to take and bled to hold. The Warmaster must know that. He must know that to draw strength from this front will see it fail.’

‘That is because it does not matter. Our enemies grow stronger, and we grow weaker. This is a last thrust of the spear by my brother. He is a general who stands before the broken wall of a fortress, with victory within his reach, but at his back he sees horsemen on the hills. He must take the fortress now. If he succeeds, he has victory. Everything else is irrelevant. Is that not so, emissary?’

Argonis did not answer but turned without bowing and moved to look at the view down the mountainside beneath them. The light played over his armour, haloing him for a second in the crimson of the dawn sun.

‘I will accompany you on your mission for the Warmaster,’ he said. ‘It is his will.’

Perturabo’s guns cycled, but he did not reply.

‘Why you, lord?’ asked Volk. ‘Why does this task fall to you?’

Perturabo turned and walked across the stone mirror of the floor, his footsteps gunshots in the quiet.

‘Because he knew I would obey,’ he said.

Zardu Layak, 'The Crimson Apostle', Master of the Unspeaking

FOUR

Maloghurst

They came for him, as he knew they would. His hands were still wet with blood. The low-burning ritual candles were the only light in the former lodge chamber. The remains of the host for the daemon he had been bargaining with hung from chains bolted to the wall. Smoke coiled from sludge-wrapped bones. The creature's forked tongue hung below its jawless skull. Maloghurst worked slowly, cutting the words that the daemon had spoken onto the old silver coin. Three more summonings, three more daemons forced to speak secrets, and he would have the totem he needed when he passed beyond.

He had just finished the inscription on the coin when he heard the chamber doors release. The candle flames billowed. He put the blood-smeared coin down and dipped his bare hands into a bronze bowl of water. Heavy footsteps spread in the darkness behind him.

'What vexes thee, my brothers?'

Silence answered him. He listened. His senses could sift patterns from the smallest of sounds; it was one of the gene-gifts that his injuries had not stolen. The rhythm of steps, the presence and absence of breath, the purr of servos in armour that were as distinct as the lines of a face, he could hear them all.

'Aximand,' he said, still not looking up, watching the blood stain the water in the bowl as he washed his hands. 'This is not like you, brother, to come unheralded and silent.'

No reply came. The sound of footsteps stopped. The shackled purr of armour thrummed through the air.

Four, thought Maloghurst, blinking as he tried to tease out the identities of the others. He lifted his hands from the water, shaking the pink drops from his crooked fingers. Power was a labyrinth of mirrors; perception,

control and belief were everything. At this moment he should have been concerned, should have been turning to see who had come into these chambers through doors that he had personally sealed, should have been reaching for a weapon to defend himself…

‘Kibre,’ he said carefully. ‘I hope that this is not a return of the concerns you have already voiced for the approach I have advocated, but if it is then voice them again, and let me show you that the path I have set is the path that the Warmaster would choose.’

He picked up the black cloth from beside the bowl and began to dry his hands. The scar tissue over his misshapen knuckles ached.

‘Tormageddon. I hear your silence, reborn one. You of all of us must see that this must be done.’ Inside his skull, he called to mind the words of scourging that he had taken from the mouth of a daemon of torment. The daemon-thing Tormageddon was powerful, somehow beyond his ability to bind, an aberration in the pattern of warp entities that he did not understand. He knew he could hurt it, though. If he needed to. ‘Our Warmaster is caught between our realm and yours, between this reality and the immaterium. His ascendancy has begun but is not yet complete. He needs our help to pass through this moment.’

Maloghurst dropped the cloth into the bowl. Water splashed up and onto the floor. He took his gauntlets from the tabletop and snapped them back into place over his hands.

Four, there were four he was sure, but he could not identify the fourth.

‘I understand that you are afraid,’ he said, looking down at the rippling water as he flexed his fingers. ‘And yes, I do mean *afraid*. Fear has many forms and only a few of the more common types are found on the battlefield. What other response could there be to this crisis, to see our father struck down, to see him unmoving while the wheels of his war turn on without his hand to guide them? What else should you feel but fear?’

He straightened each digit one at a time. Inside his skull he split his thoughts, holding the words of scourging in parallel with another, more direct and unsubtle formula. The tips of his fingers tingled.

‘You see shadows as monsters, and being Sons of Horus you want to face them, to kill them, to hold them close enough that you can feel their last breath before you open their guts and let their life drain onto the floor. But what I do is not to be feared. I am not your enemy unless you are the enemy of the Warmaster, and I know that we are all his most faithful sons.’

He paused, holding his breath. Why did they not reply? If they intended violence, then why did they not move?

‘I am the Twisted One, the master of crooked words and subtle deeds.’

He reached out and picked up his athame. Blood marked the silver blade.

‘But in this moment I ask you only to listen.’

He held ready. His flesh ached as his twin hearts pounded blood into his muscles.

‘Listen, and trust me.’

He turned around.

‘I trust you, Mal,’ said Horus Lupercal.

The silver athame dropped from crooked fingers.

Maloghurst opened his mouth to speak.

The empty shadows of the lodge chamber looked back at him.

The athame struck the floor. The sound rang in the silence.

Maloghurst’s hearts were twin hammers in his chest. For a moment he stood frozen, but then he was moving forwards, his own steps echoing as he hobbled to the chamber doors. They were still sealed, though the ritual wardings he had daubed on the metal had burned to ashen smears. He reached for the door release, then paused.

What had just happened?

A hallucination?

An attack?

A warning?

‘The powers of the gods circle you, son of Horus,’ Layak had said while they had talked. ‘The Anointed Warmaster of the Pantheon draws the angels of rage and desire, of lies and dissolution. They whisper into the ears of those that will listen. In the cracks between fear and hope they whisper. Those they whisper to move to the desires of the gods. They pull you apart, and pull your torn remains into their divine embrace.’

‘Why?’ Maloghurst asked the Word Bearer.

‘Because it is the nature of the divine to be divided.’

He keyed his vox.

‘Where is Captain Aximand?’ he asked. The link clinked and popped with static as the vox-servitor authenticated his voice command.

‘*Captain Aximand’s location is the strategium. Do you command a direct link?*’

‘No…’ said Maloghurst slowly. He was looking back at the darkness of the deserted lodge hall.

‘I trust you, Mal.’

‘There are always enemies, even if they come wearing the smiles of friends.’

‘No…’ he said again, and cut the vox-link.

Layak

The *Vengeful Spirit* and its constellation of ships slid into the distance. Behind him the cathedral space of the *Trisagion*’s bridge shook to the chants of the blessedly condemned. To call it a bridge was a failure of human language; to call it a bridge was to place its size and majesty beside the platform of boards from which primitive shipmasters bellowed orders. This space was of another order. Just as the realm of the gods made the lives of men small, so the power and purpose of this place shrank all other spaces to insignificance.

The bridge alone was half a kilometre long. Pillar-braced walls of bronze and steel rose to a vaulted roof. Brass censers the size of Titan heads swung from chains beneath painted images of the sacred constellations of the Word Bearers’ home world. Tiers of cages ran down the full length of the space. Within them, the thousand-strong choir sang praise to the gods. They would remain within the cages, their lungs slowly filling with pus and their mouths with blood, until they expired. All of them had failed in their faith and had fought to earn their condemnation to the choir cages. The air shivered around them, popping with colour as their chants rose and fell in rhythm with the ship’s pulse.

Down the centre of the chamber stood the altars of destruction. Here, the tech-priests of the Dark Mechanicum and the priests of slaughter, death and exultation moved around each other. Blood, ashes and fire stained their robes. When the *Trisagion* spoke in war it was not by the crude passing of commands; it was by ritual, the devastation it created ordained, not spoken. Layak found its expression of power breathtaking.

‘Blessings on this parting,’ said Lorgar from where he stood just in front of Layak. The image of the Warmaster’s command fleet hung before them, a projection layered over the star-dotted dark beyond the bridge’s prow windows.

‘Maloghurst proved more accepting than I expected,’ the primarch remarked.

‘He did,’ replied Layak.

‘You must have done your work well.’

‘Trust and belief are the first sins of the weak.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘Nothing of consequence, lord.’

‘Good. He always was loyal to my brother. They call him twisted, but his soul is simple.’

‘He serves and believes, not in the gods but in Horus and Horus to the last,’ said Layak.

‘To the last…’ breathed Lorgar.

Layak remained silent.

‘Horus cannot survive. Even if he rises, he cannot be allowed to lead this war…’

‘Is that not heresy?’ said Layak.

‘Heresy?’ said Lorgar, his voice low. ‘Horus is a warrior, a leader, but he is not the truth. This war is not about him. It is not about his wounded need to cast down our father, or his dreams of empire. It is about the triumph of truth. *The* truth. The gods are the only parts of existence that are eternal, that cannot be harmed. They are the only true salvation that mankind can have, that mankind must have. That is what matters, my son. Not pride or glory, or the survival of one soul above others.’

‘You think the Warmaster will fail?’

‘I think that he is both too weak and too strong, my son. Too strong to submit to the full will of the gods. That is why he sits on his throne, like a corpse at his own court. That is why the wound done to him by Russ bleeds. He is anointed of the gods. They have blessed and exalted him higher than any other, higher than even I, their most devoted servant. They have given him the keys to existence… And yet he does not embrace them. He puts himself above them. And he is strong enough to resist but not strong enough to triumph. The gods have given him power beyond anything they have bestowed on another. Yet he fights it. He resists the gods’ favour even as they lift him up. Who could be strong enough to triumph against the gods? And without submitting he will be torn apart – without submitting he will be too weak to defeat the Emperor. And then we will have failed.’

‘He is the Anointed, my lord. The gods have chosen their instrument.’

Lorgar did not answer at once but closed his eyes. His face was perfectly still. In his sight, Layak saw the primarch's white corona of power contract.

'And if he is a flawed weapon, what then? Should we stand aside and watch all that we have brought about burn to ashes?'

'If that is the will of the gods.'

'The gods gift us with power. What we do with that power is for us to decide, to either be exalted or to be broken by it. We are not their slaves. We are their champions, and what we do is either to their glory or to their displeasure.'

'And Horus… Is he not a champion who should rise by his own strength?'

Lorgar turned to look at him. Layak returned his gaze. The hooks on the inside of his mask-helm bit deep. Blood wept from the mask's eyes. He could feel the primarch's mind coiling around his own, searching for a way in.

'Remove your mask,' said Lorgar softly.

'I cannot, lord,' replied Layak, dropping his gaze. 'You know that I cannot. Only the gods may see my face and know my thoughts.'

'Am I not the voice of the divine?' asked Lorgar. 'Do you dare defy that voice?'

'You are, lord, and I will obey, and in obeying I will die.'

Lorgar was silent for a long moment, then shook his head.

'You understand then. The gods must be obeyed,' he said. The chanting of the condemned rose as the *Trisagion* began to turn. The image of the *Vengeful Spirit* was now just a bright star amongst lesser pinpricks of starlight. 'The gods placed a burden on my soul. Horus is my brother, but what is brotherhood beside the triumph of the primordial truth? Failure cannot be allowed, my son. The gods must triumph, and Horus will not give them victory. Another must take his place, must unite all under the will and majesty of the gods. Do you understand, my son?'

Layak bowed his head, as though in humility.

'You intend to take his place,' he said.

Lorgar held his gaze still on the cold stars.

'Why did it come to this?' he said. 'Why does this have to pass to me?'

The sound of the bridge and the lamentations of the condemned quieted as a gong was struck three times. The ship shivered as the warp engines began to engage.

‘Are we truly going to find Fulgrim?’ asked Layak at last.

‘Yes,’ said Lorgar. ‘A throne cannot be taken alone. Everything we do or cause to happen must serve our true purpose. That is why I have told you this, my son, and why you are coming with me. You have a great task to perform, and a greater role to play in what must be brought about.’

‘Speak your will, lord, and it shall be done.’

Lorgar looked at him, and there was sorrow in his starlit eyes.

Volk

It was dawn on the Onyx Mountain. Smoke-laced fog poured into the trench in front of Volk, curling over the armoured lip and flowing between the assembled warriors. Far off, the false thunder of a bombardment rolled as the sun rose. Volk breathed in the damp air and snapped the ninth round into his bolter. Two more sat in his palm. Two more, eleven in total, and the magazine pouches on his waist empty. It was the same for each of the fourteen legionaries waiting with him in the trench. Each of them had a melee weapon sheathed at his waist or strapped to his back: heavy-bladed gladius swords, hammers with steel crow beaks on their reverse side, axes with razor-sharp edges on their triangular heads.

Old weapons of war, thought Volk, *weapons from ages when man hacked and bled in mud to take fortresses of stone from enemies in reeking mail and dented plate.* The world was meant to have moved on, to have moved past such baseness, but here they were, warriors forged from secret lore going into battle armed like barbarians. That was what it had come to, though – war ground down to the point where battle began with the mathematics of ammo reserves and ended with hacking and bludgeoning in the mud until one side was exhausted or dead.

‘Sixty seconds,’ called the squad sergeant, pulling a studded helm over his scarred head. The rest of the squad followed suit.

All of them were new recruits, selected and raised to the Legion in the years since the war against the Emperor had begun. Faster induction and implantation methods meant that most of these warriors had not seen more than half a decade of combat. They looked like veterans though, Volk thought. No, they *were* veterans. They had been blooded and tested on worlds like Hydra Cordatus, Nestoraia, Tallarn. They knew one type of war and one type alone: killing their own kind.

Volk put his helm on. It pressurised with a hiss.

‘By your leave, commander,’ said the sergeant over the vox.

‘Carry on, sergeant’ said Volk. ‘This action is yours. I am just a passenger.’

‘As you command,’ said the sergeant.

‘Entry onto trench line!’ came a shout to Volk’s right. The squad turned as one, guns moving to cover every approach.

‘Hold fire!’ said Volk. A figure in black-and-green power armour was moving down the trench. The bronze Cthonian runes worked into the battleplate gleamed. The faceplate of the helm was embellished with silver and crowned with a red topknot that stirred in the fog-laden breeze. Argonis moved towards them with relaxed focus, like a predator watching for prey. ‘We could have killed you,’ snarled Volk as Argonis approached.

‘You could have tried,’ said the emissary. He had a black-cased boltgun clamped to his thigh and a sword buckled at his waist beside a pair of sheathed power knives. Volk recognised the black-clouded crimson of Cthonian rubies on the pommel of each knife. They were gang knives fitted with power generators above their hilts. Volk had seen them before and faced them in the practice cages, long ago now, in an age where brotherhood had meant something more than a cloak for betrayal.

‘Why are you out here?’ snarled Volk.

‘I am the voice of Horus, and I go where I please,’ said Argonis. He looked down the waiting line of Iron Warriors. ‘Why are *you* out here, brother?’

‘Raiding party,’ said Volk.

‘Then we are here for the same reason,’ said Argonis, and unfastened his bolter. He racked the arming slide.

Volk was about to snarl something but then shook his head.

‘It is time, commander,’ said the sergeant.

Volk looked at Argonis and then back at the squad.

‘Proceed,’ he said.

‘Standby,’ said the sergeant.

‘Your air cover should be coming over now,’ said Argonis over the vox. As though drawn by his words, two strike fighters shrieked past overhead. The sonic boom of their passing echoed down the trench. The ground shook an instant later. Fists of smoke and earth punched into the sky beyond the trench lip.

‘Go,’ called the sergeant. The squad vaulted out of the trench. Volk was with them.

Torn stumps of trees and charred scrub dotted a slope of bare earth, broken by jutting fingers of black stone. Three hundred metres down, the clouds of debris from the air strike were falling to the ground around the remains of a trench line. Three hundred metres.

Volk began to run. Argonis was on his right. The strike fighters wheeled overhead. Fire flickered out from the settling debris. The strike might have bought them a few metres, but whoever was in the target trench was still alive. Las-bolts smacked into the Iron Warrior to Volk’s right. Ceramite burned and flaked away from him as he kept running.

More fire came, wild at first, then sheeting up the slope in disciplined volleys. An Iron Warrior went down, the front of his armour torn apart.

A hundred metres.

Volk could see the humans hunched behind their laslocks on the trench lip, gas masks beneath chromed helms. They did not flinch as the Iron Warriors closed.

Disciplined, thought Volk. These trenches had been taken by the enemy the day before, along with another ten kilometres of defence lines across the mountainside. The human soldiers holding this section had failed when their ammunition had run out. So now the Iron Warriors came to take back what mortal hands had lost.

Argonis began to fire. Bolts exploded along the trench lip. Three soldiers vanished. Blood and chromed metal scattered into the air. None of the Iron Warriors fired. Volk caught the glint of charge coils on the parapet.

‘Plasma weapon,’ he shouted.

Target runes were blinking red in his eyes. He squeezed the trigger of his gun once. The bolt hit the plasma gun as it was about to fire. Blue-hot energy exploded out in a sphere. Rockcrete, flesh and metal became dust. Volk’s helm display dimmed. He reached the trench line and dropped into it. A human staggered towards him. Volk slammed the barrel of his bolter into the human’s face. Blood sprayed from the shattered eyepieces. Volk stamped on the figure as it collapsed. Argonis was next to him. The Cthonian fired down the trench. Bolt-rounds scattered shrapnel from the reinforced walls.

‘Moving left!’ shouted the sergeant. The squad obeyed, breaking into pairs as they spread out, blades and hands red. Argonis was the only one

firing his weapon. The Cthonian moved with fluid brutality, killing as he went, his advance blending seamlessly with the Iron Warriors' own.

'Why are you here, brother?' shouted Argonis, ducking into a niche as heavy-calibre rounds buzzed down the trench. Volk went the other way. A round hit his left shoulder, and he felt muscles tear as the shell gouged through the armour. Target runes spun amber in his eyes, searching for a lock. He fired twice. The first round roared down the trench. He put the second into the rockcrete wall. Dust and splinters fountained out. Argonis was already moving forwards through the cover they provided. More rounds flashed past. Volk followed.

'To remember,' he growled into the vox-link.

'To remember what?' said Argonis.

'What we are abandoning,' said Volk.

Argonis was three strides in front of him as they came through the dust. The heavy-calibre gun stuck out of a firing loop in a plasteel barrier across the trench. Volk could see the glint of the gunner's helm. He dipped his shoulder and charged. Normally they would have used grenades, flamers and a storm of bolt shells to tear the emplacement apart. The luxury of such methods was now only a memory.

The gun opened fire, but the shots were high. Volk had a second to wonder why the gunner had aimed wide, when the axe blow fell.

The Ultramarine had been waiting in a niche cut into the trench wall. Volk would have seen him, but the gun had fired at just the perfect time to give the Ultramarine total surprise. The power field around the blade lit as it arced down. Volk twisted, arm rising. He was out of position and off balance. He knew each of these facts with a stopped-time clarity as his eyes met the red gaze of the Ultramarine's helm. There were gold laurels worked into the warrior's temples, tiny eagle's wings on the fingers that held the axe.

Bolt-rounds struck the Ultramarine. Sapphire and gold shredded into shrapnel. The warrior staggered. Volk rammed his weight forwards. The axe blow cut wide. His shoulder struck the Ultramarine in the chest and cannoned him back into the trench wall. Rockcrete cracked under the impact. Blood scattered from the torn armour down the warrior's right side. He was injured, isolated, but he was a son of Ultramar.

Volk drew his sword. Its blade was short and heavy, the tip a wicked point. He rammed it upwards, aiming for the join under the arm. The

Ultramarine twisted. The pommel of the power axe crashed into Volk's right eye. He felt his thrust gouge across the warrior's chest plate. He whipped his forearm up and crashed his elbow into his opponent's faceplate. Crystal eyepieces shattered. Ceramite cracked. The Ultramarine rammed him back and raised a bolt pistol. Blood was running down the cheeks of the warrior's white helm. Volk knew what was coming next even as a gap opened between them. The Ultramarine raised his gun to fire.

Argonis' power knife took the Ultramarine's hand just below the wrist. Volk rammed the tip of his sword into the warrior's neck. Vulcanised rubber and cables parted, and the tip punched into flesh. Volk felt the blade hit the back of the collar ring. Blood gushed out. Volk held the dead warrior's weight for an instant. He stripped a grenade off the Ultramarine's belt, ripped the blade free, turned and threw the grenade through the firing loop of the gun emplacement. The explosion buckled the metal plates from the inside. A pair of Iron Warriors with beak-headed hammers ran past.

Volk knelt and began to strip ammunition, grenades and weapons from the dead Ultramarine. Argonis stood over him, knife and boltgun in hand.

'This is what you wished to remember, fighting like a carrion-eater hungry for bullets?'

Volk straightened and looked at his one-time friend.

'The Fourth Legion fought the Emperor's battles that no one else would. We laboured and slaughtered and bled in forgotten places. We were forsaken – ever obedient and ever ill-used. The primarch believed that our destiny could be different, that we would have a different place in the future that Horus would forge.' Volk pointed his bloody blade at the red-and-gold Eye of Horus on Argonis' armour. 'I wanted to remind myself that things do not change.'

'*Ammunition expenditure limit reached*,' called the sergeant's voice over the vox. '*Prepare for withdrawal.*'

Volk moved past Argonis, heading back along the trench towards the point they had hit the line. Before the Warmaster's order to muster at Ullanor they would have been able to hold the ground they had just cleared. Now they would have to leave it. Within a day there would not be enough troops in the fortress to man the defences they still held. That was what the battles across Ultramar's border worlds would become: every victory a delay of ever-shortening duration.

‘This is the beginning of victory,’ said Argonis from behind Volk. ‘Even if the view from here does not allow us to see it – victory is coming.’

‘Is it?’ said Volk. ‘Is that belief or hope talking?’ He turned away. Black smoke was drifting over the trench from lower down the mountain. The stuttering boom of a distant explosion rolled through the air. ‘We will obey, brother. The end was only a dream, and what do dreams matter?’

PART TWO
BURNING EMPIRE

FIVE

Ekaddon

He breathed and closed his eyes for a second. Blood ran down his face and shoulders. There had not been time for it to clot. His hearts were already settling into a low, steady rhythm. It was one thing that he thought he missed of humanity – the feeling of exertion, the breathlessness, the hammer of a single heartbeat in his chest. The gene-ascension that remade a man into a warrior of the Legions had stolen that.

He opened his eyes. The remains of fifteen combat servitors lay around him. Blood oozed from their meat, and oil from their machine grafts. All of them had been fresh conversions, made with good strong stock from the slave chaff held in the lower decks. All of them had been killers of the type bred by situations in which one needed to be a predator lest one become the prey. The Mechanicum had left them their full motor function and the parts of the brain that held their combat instincts. Aggression enhancers, crude nerve grafting and weapon implants had pushed their abilities past the point of effectiveness into a realm of inhuman slaughter. He had demanded no less from the tech-priests, and they had supplied in full.

Still… He had to confess that he found the result disappointing.

Others might favour sword or bolter, or an axe like that in his hand, but the knife was the soul of a killer. That was the Cthonian lesson, one that had been delivered by the muffled cries of the dying in dark tunnels during another life. It was a remnant of the world that had borne him and the brief childhood that had shaped him. It had a… truth. Only the brother in blood who had come with him into the Legion at his side was, perhaps, better at this way of murder.

He rolled his shoulders and padded across the chamber, bare feet splashing in the puddles of blood and oil. He put the axe back on the weapon rack, activating its power field briefly to burn the blood from its

blade. He was bare to the waist, and the tattoos and brands covering his skin stretched as he tensed and released each one in turn. The marks were mainly geometric, the jagged lines of Cthonia's gang language. It was not a sophisticated tongue, but you didn't need sophistication when your main purpose was to threaten. In the gloom or total dark of Cthonia's tunnels it was meant to be read as much by touch as by eye, the marks gouged deep into stone or metal by blade tip. It was a language of cuts, made by murderers. Kalus Ekaddon found that amusing as often as he found it appropriate.

He looked at the weapon rack. He was a good killer, always had been. It was something that had come easily to him as a child, that had kept him alive and then given him everything he knew. Pride, status – such as that was – and brotherhood had all come from the edge of his blade or the muzzle of his gun.

He stepped away from the rack and drew his dagger from its thigh sheath. A power field generator sat at the base of the blade, but otherwise it was the same weapon that he had brought from Cthonia: straight-bladed, narrow-tipped, razor-sharp on one side with a blood fuller running beside its blunt back. A mirror coin had been beaten into the pommel and then burnished smooth. He flicked it between fore and reverse grip, then opened his mouth to call the next wave of servitors.

The doors to the practice chamber clanged as their locks released. Ekaddon turned as they began to pull wide. Falkus Kibre walked through them. The humming vibration of his Terminator plate shivered along Ekaddon's nerves as he watched the Widowmaker advance towards him. He did not move and kept his face composed in its habitual half-sneer.

'Brother,' said Kibre, coming to a halt. Even without the Terminator armour, Kibre was a huge man; with it he was a mountain of jet surfaces and blunt edges.

'Falkus,' said Ekaddon. 'You are overdressed if you came to test your skill.'

Kibre gave a short growl that might have been a laugh and walked past Ekaddon, boots crushing the corpses of the servitors to pulp. He walked around the training pit, head turning as he glanced at the remains.

'You are worried that you are losing your edge, brother?' said Kibre at last, nudging a severed head with the tip of his boot.

'An edge is only worth something if you keep it sharp,' said Ekaddon.

‘Truth,’ barked Kibre. ‘Truth…’ He nodded at the knife in Ekaddon’s hand. ‘You did this with that?’

Ekaddon shook his head.

‘This is for the next batch.’

‘You like your childhood toys, don’t you, brother? I heard that you tried to kill the warrior who tried to take it from you on Cthonia when you were recruited. Story says he lost an eye to you.’

‘He didn’t,’ said Ekaddon.

‘Just a story then…’ said Kibre. ‘Who was it that picked you out of the tunnels? Sejanus? The Half-Heard?’

‘You know who it was,’ said Ekaddon carefully.

Kibre’s eyes moved back to the knife in Ekaddon’s hand and flicked up to where the silver cord held the pierced obsidian disc against his forearm. The whirl of feathers, claws and eyes cut into the disc were invisible in the gloom of the training chamber, but he knew they were there, an echo of the pattern in his dreams. He had tied it there while he trained and would hang it back around his neck later. Its weight and touch against his skin were still unfamiliar.

‘Loyalty…’ said Kibre, hefting the word deliberately. ‘These are difficult times, testing times.’ Ekaddon heard the weight placed on the word.

‘You mean your dispute with Maloghurst?’ He felt a flare of pleasure as Kibre blinked. ‘I am not of the Mournival, brother, but I wear the same black as you. We are First Company. We guard and watch, and we hear…’

‘He cannot be trusted,’ said Kibre.

Ekaddon raised an eyebrow above his habitual sneer.

‘The Warmaster trusts him.’

Kibre clenched his teeth and then let out a long breath.

‘The Warmaster… in his… withdrawal cannot trust or condemn. We must do that for him. We are his guardians.’

Ekaddon kept his eyebrow raised.

‘And Abaddon? What would our First Captain say?’

‘He is far away, but he would agree.’ He paused. ‘Aximand agrees.’

‘Tormageddon?’ asked Ekaddon. ‘What does the creature think? Has it chosen a side? Because that’s what we are talking about, isn’t it. Sides chosen, lines drawn? He wants to use some sorcery to try to what? Revive the Warmaster? And you and Aximand think that the sorcerous ways taught

by the likes of Erebus and Lorgar are suspect, and that the Warmaster will recover.'

Kibre did not answer. Ekaddon grinned, the gesture wide and humourless. 'You don't trust me. You do not know if I would be with you if you gave the order to spill Maloghurst's guts onto the deck, do you?' He sneered and flicked the knife into the air. It spun as it fell. He caught it, threw it again and caught it in the other hand, then threw it up again, grinning, the knife tumbling and glinting. 'We are all murderers and betrayers, hadn't you heard, brother? I have two hundred and seven personal kills between Isstvan and Beta-Garmon to prove that I should never be trusted.'

'This is serious, brother,' growled Kibre.

'So am I,' said Ekaddon, catching the knife between forefinger and thumb as it flashed past. He held it steady. 'I am captain of the Reavers, I wear the black of the First Company. I am bloodied many times over. I have stood at our Warmaster's side, at your side, and have never hesitated to kill at our lord's will. What is there that you would question in that?'

'Your… lodge.' Kibre said the word as though he were chewing something bitter and sharp.

Ekaddon laughed and turned away.

'It is not a lodge, brother. The days of the lodge have gone, its purpose served. Surely you remember, or perhaps you *cannot say?*' He loaded the old words of secrecy with mockery and saw the Widowmaker's eyes flash. He let his own satisfaction bleed into his grin. 'We were both there, and we both know the truth now – there are no lodges, no Erebus pulling the strings to his own design. We are all of the one lodge now, and that lodge is the Legion of the Warmaster.' He widened his grin, showing the black and silver runes set into his teeth. 'All the rest are dead.'

'Your Cathartidae…' began Kibre.

'There have always been brotherhoods amongst warriors, even as far back as Cthonia. You must remember that, yes? The Cathartidae do not follow me. They don't follow anyone. They follow principles – will and strength and power. It's about the individual, not the whole. You see, it is not even a secret. I would offer to induct you, but I think it might not suit your tastes.'

Kibre held his gaze steady on Ekaddon's grin for a long moment and then shook his head.

‘I should have killed you a long time ago,’ he said.

‘You should have tried,’ said Ekaddon. ‘Then at least we would not have had to have this conversation.’

Both of them had gone very still. Ekaddon was still grinning, Kibre’s sunken eyes dark and unblinking.

Then the Widowmaker laughed, the sound like a gunshot, his armoured bulk growling as he half turned away shaking his head.

‘Oaths in blood, but you make it easy to dislike you,’ he said.

Ekaddon bowed his head.

‘One of my many gifts,’ he said. ‘But you came here to find out if I would stand with you, if you and Maloghurst and Aximand decide to tear the Legion apart. If you still want an answer, here it is – I don’t care. I don’t care if Maloghurst is right or you are, if Aximand agrees or does not. I don’t care. It’s your fight, not mine.’

‘Just like back on Cthonia?’

Ekaddon shrugged.

‘Just like that.’

‘If it comes to it, are you with us or with the Twisted One?’

‘I stand where I always have, with myself and with Lupercal,’ said Ekaddon, shaking his head. ‘But you, brother… If you decide that everyone who is not for you is against you, then you will have even fewer friends than you do already.’

Kibre raised his chin slightly.

‘Maloghurst says that he is helping the Warmaster, that his designs and sorceries are needed – those words would not move you to think that path worth supporting?’

Now it was Ekaddon’s turn to laugh.

‘You know me better than that, Falkus.’

‘Captain Kibre,’ he snarled, but then nodded. ‘And yes, I suppose I do. Just make sure that it stays that way. You have always been a good soldier, Kalus.’

Falkus Kibre turned and walked out of the training circle, the grinding purr of his armour receding into the shadows. Ekaddon watched the captain of the Justaerin go, and then turned back to the empty circle of the practice chamber.

He rolled his shoulders, feeling muscle loosen.

‘Repeat previous training parameter,’ he said, and heard the control servitors clatter in response. ‘Increase combat servitor aggression to maximal.’

‘Compliance,’ said the control servitor. Ekaddon flicked the knife between his hands. Kibre had always been a sharp but straightforward soul. He had accepted Ekaddon’s answer but had not thought to ask the question that really mattered.

Fifteen combat servitors clanked forwards. Chainblades gunned to life, power flails and piston spears rose.

The question was not what Ekaddon believed was right, or who was right. He did not care. The question was, what would give him what he wanted?

‘Activate,’ he growled, and the servitors charged.

Layak

Orcus was a violated world.

It had never been beautiful. Once, clouds had swirled across much of the scrubland of its surface. Its seas and oceans had been the sullen black of poisoned wine. Ice had capped its poles, which extended their cold grasp down to touch the mountain ranges with bitter winds. Human colonists had found it in one of the measureless epochs of Old Night. Orcus was not kindly to its adoptive children. All that remained of the generations who had tried to make a life on its surface were tiny clutches of humanity living in dread of unspecified fears. When the Great Crusade had found it, the iterators had been able to discover that the ragged, fur-clad humans believed they lived on the edge of the realm of the dead, that they were cursed.

They were right, of course. Looking at the surface of Orcus rise towards him, Layak wondered if the bearers of the Imperial Truth had ever paused to ask themselves if those that they tried to ‘Illuminate’ already saw the truth perfectly. Orcus *was* a world on the edge of another realm.

Now it lay amongst the heavens like a shattered skull on the battlefield of forgotten gods. Continent-sized fires had flayed the forests from its surface. Thermic charges had turned the ice caps to steam. Rolling clouds of grey ash were its shroud. The mountains alone remained, clawing at the lightning-threaded murk. Void stations ringed it, and ships laboured through the dust-filled void around it to bring pilgrim warriors to feed its dark mouth.

‘Did the burning of this place have a point beyond ritual devotion?’ asked Layak as the grey swirl of Orcus’ atmosphere rushed up towards their descending shuttle-barge. ‘Lord,’ he added.

‘It is beautiful, don’t you think?’ said Lorgar. ‘There are those amongst your brothers who have looked on this place and said that they can feel the breath of the gods on their faces.’

‘Yes,’ said Layak, forming the word carefully. He had felt strange ever since Lorgar had told him what role he would play in the plan to replace Horus as Warmaster. ‘They are blessed,’ he finished.

‘You have never beheld the doors to the labyrinth ways, have you?’ said Lorgar as the view beyond the shuttle-barge’s arched windows became a swirling sheet of grey.

‘I have never been so honoured,’ said Layak.

‘It is… something. Perhaps it will move even your soul.’

‘Perhaps, lord.’

Lorgar looked at him, eyes unblinking. Layak’s mask contracted over his face. Iron hooks pulled red tears from his cheeks. He returned the primarch’s gaze. Besides the two of them, only Layak’s blade slaves shared the shuttle-barge’s hold. The space could have held fifty legionaries in full armour, but Lorgar had ordered that they travel to the door between worlds alone.

‘Watch,’ said Lorgar, turning his gaze back to the view beyond the ashen clouds.

The shuttle-barge fired altitude thrusters and its flight levelled out. The clouds thinned. A splintered spike of black stone loomed out of the gloom. The shuttle-barge slewed around the finger of stone. Stablights lit on its hull and sliced down. Suddenly, the clouds around them were gone, the unbroken layer above seeming like a lid nailed over the sky. Clear air dropped away below. Flashes of lightning revealed the sheer flanks of black mountains rising around them as they dropped lower. Black rain fell in an unending deluge.

The shuttle-barge turned, passing between two cliff faces. Layak caught the glimmer of fires burning somewhere in the wide bowl beyond. The craft cleared the gap between the mountains.

And the ground fell away, and kept falling. Despite himself, Layak felt a jolt of vertigo. Blackness extended in front of his eyes, down and down without end.

A wound lay open in the skin of the planet. Explosives and stone burners had scooped away half a mountainside, leaving a tapered shaft wide enough to swallow a battleship. Fused crystals glittered in the smooth walls. Huge metal gantries spiralled down the hole. Webs of girders and cables held them to the glass-smooth rock. Torch towers dotted the gantries, streaming white-hot flames into the rain-laden dark. The corpses of sacrifices hung from chains beneath platforms. The structures that covered their tops looked to have been made from the flesh of the mountain: temples, armouries, storehouses, all of their roofs scrawled with words incised into the black stone.

But Layak could see that the darkness descended far below the deepest structure. As he watched, lightning earthed on the wall of the shaft and whipped down its walls. For a second he had the impression of a tongue flicking out of the mouth of a great beast.

The shuttle-barge fired thrusters to hold station above the drop, then began to descend. The torch towers breathed blue-hot flames in salute. The buildings on the gantries grew larger, and Layak realised that the abyss beneath them had stolen their scale. These were fanes and muster halls that could house maniples of Titans, or tens of thousands of troops. This was a way-station on the road to the alien dimension known as the webway. War machines, soldiers and materiel came here, were blessed by the priests of the primordial truth and then went down into the dark of the labyrinth realm.

The breach into the webway had not been made by the Word Bearers. It was old, a remnant of a war between ancient races now long dead. But the gods remembered, and their daemons had guided Lorgar to Orcus, as well as to other worlds where the doors between worlds could be forced open again. Some gates had been drowned under oceans. Deserts and the bones of dead cities had surrounded others. Alien jungles had grown up around the door on Lasil X, strangling it in metre-thick creepers. On Orcus the doorway had waited in darkness, far beneath the light of the land above – waited and dreamed strangeness into the world. Then Lorgar had found it, and his servants had bored a hole through mountains straight into its mouth.

Layak realised that Lorgar was watching him as they slid down to the lowest platform circling the shaft.

‘Magnificent, is it not?’ said the primarch.

The shuttle-barge jerked as its landing thrusters fired. It slewed around and settled onto a wide platform jutting from the shaft wall. The doors down the side of the barge hinged up. Wind gusted in, carrying the smell of rain and ash. Layak expected to see a waiting throng of supplicants on the landing pad – such things followed Lorgar like a shadow – but instead there were just ten figures, swathed and hooded in crimson, standing in a semicircle. Raindrops hissed a metre from them, exploding to steam in mid-air. A heat haze shimmered around them, blurring and folding their shapes. Some were tall and rake-thin, others squat and bulging beneath their robes. Some seemed almost human. All blazed in the rune-spun sight of Layak's mask. Whispers of countless languages breathed in his ears as he looked at them. For the first time in a long time he felt himself pause.

They were the Oracles of the Ashen Saint. All of them were sacred augurs who revered the Blessed Lady and who read the tides of the warp. They existed under the protection of the primarch and were esteemed almost as highly as the Lost Saint of the Pantheon. Few amongst the Legion had ever seen the Weeping Ones, as some called them. Layak had never encountered them himself and had thought them an indulgence of sentiment. Now he realised he had made an error.

The crimson ten bowed as Lorgar walked towards them. All other mortals would have knelt and pressed their faces into the wet stone of the platform. These simply hinged their cowled heads down for three heartbeats and then raised them again.

'Holiness,' said a voice from amongst the ten. It sounded female to his ears, but cracked and folded with harmonics that made the wards etched into the inside of his armour burn. 'Your coming was breathed into the blood of the dying, and your will is writ on the storm's light.'

'Favourable omens,' said Lorgar.

'Omens good and ill are all the same when seen from eternity.'

Lorgar gave a small smile.

'Quite so,' he said. 'I do not recognise your voice. To whom do I speak?'

The figure did not answer but turned her hooded head towards Layak. He felt himself tense.

'You bring your hollow man with you,' said the voice.

Layak felt his mask's inner hooks bite and its silver fangs lengthen like a predator snarling at a rival.

'He will be my companion as I cross the threshold.'

‘What do you seek?’ asked the hooded figure, looking back to Lorgar.

‘I seek my lost brother. I seek the angel of excess that was Fulgrim.’

The crimson ten hissed, heads swaying beneath red velvet. Ghost auras flared from them in Layak’s sight, shimmering in grey confusion and blue fear. Some raised their arms. Layak glimpsed long fingers and parchment-white skin.

‘The Chosen of Perfection…’ said one of the tallest of the figures. Its voice was high and brittle, like the scratching of glass edges. ‘To walk such a path… To begin it…’

‘I know that only a few may pass on such a journey. That is why I bring only a few. I have read the augurs too. I will need a guide.’

‘Of course, Lord Aurelian,’ said the figure that had first spoken, and it raised its hands to drop its hood. The head beneath was shaved bare, the features young, female and unmarked by scars. Soot tattoos ringed her eyes and flowed down her cheeks in ragged tears. And the eyes themselves were cataract-white. Power burned from them. Layak realised she was blind.

There was a pause as the two faced each other.

‘I do not know you,’ said Lorgar, and Layak thought there was doubt warring with certainty in the primarch’s voice.

‘How can even you know all that serve at your will?’ said the blind woman. ‘I am called Actaea. I am the oracle of this door. I will walk with you and be your guide.’

Layak felt as though Lorgar would dispute it, but then the moment faded and he nodded.

‘We are blessed,’ he said.

‘Perhaps,’ said Actaea. ‘It has not been written.’

Volk

Perturabo watched the flow of cold data from the heart of the *Iron Blood*. Screens hung from the ceiling around him. Tactical information scrolled across them in an endless cascade. These were not displays that turned details into maps and readouts; this was primary data from across the *Iron Blood*’s fleet. Engine outputs, gun charge readiness, position error margins, crew status – all of it was passing over the screens undiluted and unmediated. Perturabo had been absorbing it all for an hour, only his eyes moving. Occasionally the arrangement of the screens would alter, but the Lord of Iron remained still at their centre. His Iron Circle automata

surrounded him in a loose ring. Green sensor beams flicked from their eyes, washing back and forth over their surroundings.

Volk had come from the surface after his final ground action on the slopes of the mountain. Trench dirt still clung to the scratches in his armour, at odds with the sterile surroundings. He had stood in the *Iron Blood*'s strategium only once before. Then, as now, he was struck by the quiet. Others, who saw the Legion as the breakers of fortresses and heard the Iron in their name as the roar of cannons, would have been surprised at the peace of this place.

The chamber was circular, its floor tiered so that the banks of system controls rose from the open space at the centre to a domed roof of bare metal. Hundreds of servitors sat in cradles of tubes and wires, their skin grey from years spent in perpetual gloom. Black-uniformed serfs moved silently amongst them. Here and there, tech-priests in white robes bent over control panels, metal hands clicking softly as they tapped keys and adjusted dials. All of them carried out their tasks with barely a word. The chamber was buried deep in the *Iron Blood*'s hull, its corridors watched by slaved gun nests and cybernetica maniples.

On other ships the place of command would have been the bridge. The light of stars would have fallen through huge viewports, but not on the *Iron Blood*. Even before the first engagements of the war, Perturabo had kept the interior of the ship sealed from the view of the void beyond. Part of that was purely practical: viewports were points of weakness in the hull and afforded no advantage in battle. Their absence also focused the mind. Everything that you need to see is before you, it said, let nothing distract you from it. The last reason, Volk suspected, was a lesson taught by siegecraft and re-taught by the last decade of fighting warriors who possessed the same base capabilities as the IV Legion – a typical bridge, high on the hull of a ship, was too easy a target.

'All elements are in place,' said Perturabo, his voice low but carrying across the chamber. 'Begin the first phase.'

'By your will,' came the reply from the serfs. The hum of control systems blended with the murmur of the crew passing orders. The vibrations of the ship were a base note that rose through Volk's feet. He had tried to read and collate the data passing before Perturabo, but he had eventually had to admit defeat. There was simply too much. He had risen through the Legion's hierarchy and passed through layers of mental

conditioning that allowed him to function at levels of tactical complexity that would break most mortal minds. But this was like trying to drink from a waterfall. He could read generalities and hazy impressions of the reality in the void outside the ship, but that was all.

Argonis removed his helmet and locked it to his belt. The light of the data screens flickered in his eyes. Volk could tell that the emissary was about to speak.

‘You wish to see what the Warmaster’s command has brought about,’ said Perturabo, his head turning to look at Argonis. His skin was parchment-pale, drawn tight over the skull beneath. His armour hissed as hidden pistons flexed like muscles.

Argonis nodded.

Perturabo gestured. A cone of light sprang into being. Krade and its system glowed green in the projection. A spiral of ships extended from the planet’s northern pole, each also marked in green.

The enemy war fleet held off, watching and waiting to see what the Lord of Iron was doing. Sensor data ringed each of the enemy ships. Most were medium tonnage warships, crewed by humans. Two were behemoths of the void. The *Acresas* and the *Nebula Born* were both war barques of the Cassini dynasty, exiled lords of the Jovian void-clans returned from the edge of the galactic rim. Beside these hung the serrated barb of a lone Legiones Astartes cruiser. The *Consul of Eternity* gleamed with bronze plating, and the symbol of the Ultramarines sat above its prow, clutched in the claws of a silver hawk. It was a considerable force – not enough to blockade a world but more than enough to dispute one. Volk took in the display, his eyes moving over the clusters of enemies, assimilating the position. Argonis spoke his thoughts out loud.

‘That is the Dagger of Orion,’ said the emissary, nodding at the deployment pattern of the enemy ships. ‘The Ultramarines are cautious, but they will strike once it is clear what our ships intend.’

‘You are a scholar of void war as well as an ambassador,’ said Perturabo. ‘Tell me, then, what would you do to break clear of the system?’

Argonis did not hesitate.

‘Send two substantive forces running for the inner reaches of the system, draw them to counter, and then advance your fleet directly at those trying to contain you. Concentrate strikes and burn at maximum speed to break through.’

‘Simple and direct,’ rasped Perturabo. ‘I can almost taste the Cthonian ash in it.’ Perturabo’s eyes narrowed as they turned from the emissary to the screens of data. ‘But Guilliman’s dogs stand against us, and while they are many things, they are not fools.’ He breathed and raised a hand. The weapon pod on its back vented cooling gas in a hissing exhalation. His fingers opened with a melody of smooth gears. The thrum of distant engines increased. On the display, the marker of the *Iron Blood* began to move.

‘They have already theorised that part of the fleet might be trying to break out.’ Signals and data markers sparkled amongst the Iron Warriors ships. ‘They have already made allowance for that fact.’ The *Iron Blood*’s fleet was accelerating. The spiral formation of the ships began to rotate faster. ‘Your plan would still work. We would still break through. Casualties would be almost identical to those we shall sustain.’

Volk watched as the enemy elements began to respond. Ordnance launch warnings flashed beside the clusters of ships. In his mind he heard the roar as torpedoes kissed the void and engines flared to full power. In the strategium, all was silence, and the distant growl of plasma reactors sounded like the echo of gathering thunder.

‘An adequate solution,’ said Perturabo, ‘but one that misses the point.’ Weapon and full battle readiness icons flashed through the Iron Warriors fleet. ‘There are four elements to our force. One remains here to hold the void for as long as the battle on the surface lasts. Two are battlefleets that will make for Mondus Kraton and Numinous, and from there travel through the Beta-Garmon breach to the muster at Ullanor…’

‘Lord Perturabo,’ called a tactical serf from the tiers of systems stations. ‘All elements await your word.’ Perturabo did not shift his gaze from Argonis. The emissary returned it unblinking.

‘Do you know what the true nature of iron is? Even when still, even when it is a lump of ore in the ground, iron dreams, for it knows its purpose…’ He looked at the serf who had spoken a second before. He nodded. ‘That purpose is to cut…’

The serf turned, gesturing to her underlings.

‘To crush…’ said Perturabo, in a voice that rasped like a whetstone on a keen edge.

Orders crackled across the vox. The scads of data reflected in Perturabo’s eyes flickered and began to flow faster.

‘To break.’

The holo-display was rotating, the view broadening. The entirety of the Iron Warriors fleet was dropping into formation around and behind the *Iron Blood* as the vast capital ship accelerated. The enemy ship groups were moving too, burning on attack vectors, sliding against the stars so that they could plunge down into the mass of the Iron Warriors ships like hawks through a flock of doves. But they were moving too slowly, and Volk could tell that in their theoretical projections, the commanders had assumed that a force would remain close to Krade; that even if they came in strength, the Iron Warriors would not come as a whole; that they could not cohere as fast as they had.

'I have always admired Cthonian directness,' said Perturabo, his gaze again locked on Argonis as the glow of battle data flared and shifted behind him. 'The spear thrust, the single strike which ends all conflict. But a spear thrust is only as good as the target it strikes at.'

'You are not withdrawing from the system…' began Argonis. Volk's gust of laughter cut him off.

Volk looked at the primarch, biting back the cold humour that had risen in him as he realised what they were doing. Perturabo glanced at him, and in the lightless depths of the primarch's gaze he saw a flicker of something he had not seen in a long time: a connection, a moment of shared understanding so strong that for that instant he felt that his next thought was an echo of Perturabo's own.

'You do not see, brother,' said Volk. 'You think that our only purpose is to follow your order, that we are swords to be wielded and then put down.'

The mass of the Iron Warriors fleet was pushing forwards, a shotcannon blast fired at where the Ultramarines warship moved with its shoal of escort craft. The *Iron Blood*'s sisters spread in a wide cone around it. Fire began to shiver across the holo-projection. Shield data-values decremented. Ammunition expenditure surged.

'But we are not tools to be used,' said Forrix, coming to stand next to Volk.

The enemy fleet was reacting. Fire lashed into outer elements of the Iron Warriors formation. Ships died. Shields crumpled. Hulls split and gushed fire and light into the dark. But the *Iron Blood* cut on, the distance between it and the *Consul of Eternity* shrinking.

'Our iron is in our blood, not in our blades.'

They were losing ships. They were suffering. But none of that mattered. As Volk watched the Ultramarines ships spiral and pour fire at them, he knew that there were Legion brothers dying there that were just splinters of light set before his eyes.

‘Why?’ asked Argonis as the *Consul of Eternity* began to burn under the fire of five warships.

Perturabo did not answer for a moment. He was watching as the casualty values rose.

‘Because we were made to build, but now we exist to destroy.’ Then he raised a hand, and with a flick the screens of data were blank and the air where the holo-projection had been empty. ‘Send the order for the fleet elements to separate and translate to the warp as soon as we are past the system threshold.’

‘Our course?’ asked Argonis as Perturabo turned and moved towards the chamber’s doors. The Iron Circle turned their green gazes on the emissary. Fine gears clicked and whirred in their arms as they shifted posture fractionally. Volk was reminded of the muscles flexing in a warrior’s sword arm. Argonis’ face remained impassive. ‘Where are we bound?’ he called.

‘Even Angron’s wild dogs need bullets and armour,’ said Forrix. ‘So we go to the forge that feeds them.’

‘Sarum,’ said Perturabo without turning. ‘We are going to the cradle of the dragons of war.’

SIX

Maloghurst

Maloghurst passed through the *Vengeful Spirit* as a ghost. The passages he moved through were narrow, and, until recently, untrodden by all but the lowest maintenance servitors. Pipes and bundles of cables lined the circular walls. The air buzzed with static. There was almost no light, but his eyes gathered the scraps of what there was and made an image of the world for him in grey monochrome. A loose cloak covered his armour, but what truly hid him was not the cloak, nor the shroud of cantrips that stole the sound and sight of his passing. What made him invisible was simply that he walked where no one else walked.

There were marks from the Wolves' incursion here: spent shells, splinters of ceramite, the soot and dust of explosions. Maloghurst moved past them, listening all the while to the change in the ship's pulse. It was breaking anchor, it and its court of warships. Out in the darkness, vast engines would be pouring plasma into the void. Signals would be flicking between vessels. Huge craft would slide into position next to the *Vengeful Spirit.* The warp drives would kindle soon and begin to loosen the weave of reality.

He thought of Aximand – doubting, noble Aximand, the last simple warrior of the Mournival. He thought of him standing on the bridge, watching the flow of commands across the fleet, the stitched mask of his face furrowed by thoughts of the greater war far beyond what he could see. He was an able commander who had overseen the breaking of worlds, but the command of a war like this was beyond even him. He had coped so far, following the direction of the Warmaster's last orders, but soon that momentum would run out. Aximand knew that, knew that only the Warmaster could hold together the storm he had created.

But what would that understanding do to Aximand? How would the weight of the unknown colour his actions? Maloghurst thought he knew,

and he did not like the answer that he saw.

He paused at a junction, checked his position against his mental map and looked for the floor hatch. Sure enough, there it was, its edges hidden by dust and a layer of corrosion. He knelt, fingers finding the release. He paused, looking along each of the dark branches of the tunnel around him.

‘I know you are there,’ he said. ‘The need for theatrics is tiresome.’

‘But prudence and care are never without value,’ answered a voice from the dark.

A hiss of breath and a scrape of sharp metal on metal came from the dark as Sota-Nul unfolded into sight, mechadendrites pulling her from a fissure between two pipes like a spider emerging from a burrow.

Maloghurst felt his jaw clench. The sight of Kelbor-Hal’s representative always made him think of the sound of insect carapaces crunching under his boot.

‘I hope that you have followed through with all aspects/necessities of your plan, Twisted One,’ she said. A wet clicking noise came from beneath the black folds of her robes. Maloghurst wondered if it was a smile. Or a laugh. ‘If you have made an error, the outcome is unlikely to be favourable for you.’

‘You have my thanks for being here,’ he said, fighting to stop his teeth gritting as he spoke.

‘The values of sincerity in your voice are below your usual achievement level,’ she said. ‘Of course you are pleased that I am here. Your intent could scarcely have hope of success without my presence/cooperation.’

He let out a quiet breath. She was right of course. But he still would have liked to shoot her.

‘Let’s move,’ he said, reaching for the handle of the hatch in the floor.

Sota-Nul raised a single mechadendrite. Maloghurst stopped, held by the gesture. He noticed for the first time that the three manipulators at the end were human fingers, the skin waxen and yellow.

‘A moment,’ said Sota-Nul. The human fingers began to curl shut one joint at a time. ‘There,’ she said as the last digit closed. A deep swell of vibration rolled through the floor and walls as the warp engines came online in the depths of the ship. In the warren tunnels the slaves and menials would be still, eyes closed, some moaning, some whispering prayers to the new gods. In the command nodes, eyes would be watching for system failures or temporal anomalies. Sota-Nul’s brothers and sisters in the Mechanicum

would be crooning over their systems. Even if one of the ship's systems would normally have noticed a sub-maintenance hatch open, the chances of that alert being heeded were now negligible.

Maloghurst pulled the hatch open and swung into the space beneath it. His twisted flesh protested, but he overrode the pain with a twitch of will. Sota-Nul followed him, climbing down suspended between her mechadendrites. She pulled the hatch closed after them. Maloghurst began to climb down the shaft, hands and feet finding the rungs bolted into the wall.

'It is fortunate that the Wolves did not find this route,' said Sota-Nul as they descended.

'How would they?' asked Maloghurst. 'Even that fool Loken did not know this ship as well as he thought. To find places like this you have to look with a different eye.'

'A traitor's eye…'

'An eye that does not assume that anything is innocent,' replied Maloghurst.

'The Justaerin will be watching. Even if they do not know of this exact route into the throne chambers, they will be watching.'

'They will,' agreed Maloghurst.

Kibre… Ever the shadow of Abaddon but without the depths that the First Captain hid behind his mask of aggression. The Widowmaker would have to be dealt with, if this gambit did not succeed. While the current situation worked slowly on Aximand's weaknesses, the effect had been swift with Kibre. He had reverted to suspicion, to denial and protection. He would never have agreed to what Maloghurst was going to try. Worse, he would have killed the equerry if he had attempted it openly. Maloghurst had seen that in Kibre's eyes outside the throne room with Lorgar. He was terrified but could feel no fear, and that paradox did things to the mind, predictably human things.

'You do not seem concerned,' said Sota-Nul.

'I have your help, do I not?' said Maloghurst, stepping from the wall of the shaft to the passage floor beneath. He could feel the purr of sensor waves vibrating just at the edge of hearing. If he stepped a metre either way at this point, alerts would begin to sound that even the warp translation would not mask. 'Does not the representative of the Fabricator General pass where she will?'

Sota-Nul slithered down to his side. She rotated her head, code clicking and hissing from beneath her cowl. The murmur of the sensors vanished.

‘If you open a door and find a weapon aimed at you, that freedom has limited utility.’

Maloghurst moved down the tunnel. This close to his goal he could feel the warp flexing and shivering even within the dampening envelope of the Geller field. So close… He just had to hope that he had judged right. He reached the door. It was small, heavy and the locking mechanism within it was intricate and strong enough to hold back an army.

Sota-Nul drifted forwards and then jerked to a halt a metre from Maloghurst. Her hooded head twitched, then turned to look at him. The colour of the lenses within her cowl shifted from violet to crimson.

‘There are reports of riots amongst the menial gangs.’

Maloghurst smiled to himself.

‘A common enough occurrence during a translation, though ill-advised on their part. They will not survive retribution.’

Sota-Nul shook her head again.

‘Somehow they have penetrated the command citadel. Their numbers are large. Indications are that they have succumbed to a mass derangement of suicidal magnitude. The Justaerin have moved personally to seal the throne chamber levels.’

‘Oh… now a coincidence like that could be considered convenient,’ he said, keeping his voice flat. ‘Please open this door now.’

‘There will still be one of the First Company within,’ hissed Sota-Nul. ‘Not even your serpent ways could remove that honour guard from his place.’

‘No,’ he replied, ‘I could not do that. Now open the door.’

The tech-witch hesitated. Her mechadendrites flexed in the air for a second, and then she drifted forwards, muttering sounds that might have been screeds of machine code or whatever passed for curses amongst her kind. She stopped in front of the door and pulled a key from beneath her robe with the waxen fingers. It was made of black metal, and its teeth glinted with circuitry in the red light of her eyes. She slotted it into the door and turned it.

A murmur of machinery purred through the door, and then it hinged away from them. Maloghurst ducked through, followed by the tech-witch, and stepped into the shadows of the Warmaster’s throne room.

An aimed bolter waited for them, steady in the hands of a black-armoured warrior.

Maloghurst inclined his head briefly. Behind the calm mask of his face, he remembered the last time they had met, days ago in the utter quiet of one of the *Vengeful Spirit*'s forgotten reaches.

'Do you understand what I am asking of you?' he had asked.

'Treachery,' the warrior said. 'You are asking for treachery.'

Maloghurst held the warrior's gaze, unblinking, and then nodded once.

'Exactly.'

'Then we have an understanding,' the warrior said.

'If you fail, or are discovered…' he began.

'Then I will end with my head impaled on a spike at best, and at worst… a lot worse than that.' The warrior grinned the last words, showing rows of steel teeth with delicately sharp points. His face was pale, the eyes amber, and the gang tattoos that curled on his cheeks were like shadows cast by the wings of crows.

'Your reward–'

'Power is risk, is it not, lord equerry? I risk that you might prove less subtle than your reputation, and then we both…' He paused, the grin still in place. 'Well, we shall suffer the price. But if you succeed in whatever it is that you are doing, then you will need those you can trust, those that have served you. What is the point of making demands now? My reward is to rise as your enemies fall, lord. That is the way of things. That is the understanding I have. That is what I am agreeing to.'

Maloghurst nodded.

'You were always perceptive.'

'I am what I will,' the warrior said.

'Cometh the hour, captain…' said Maloghurst. The black-armoured warrior held still for a second and then dropped his aim.

'You are late,' said Kalus Ekaddon.

Layak

The platform descended into the waiting dark. Cries rose from the spiral of gantries on the shaft wall. The sky above was spider-webbed with lightning. Forty-seven figures stood on the platform. The Ashen Oracles had laboured over entrails and smoke for ten nights to determine the numbers most likely to be accepted by the doorway, and the most favourable moment for their

departure. Lorgar, Actaea and forty-two warriors of the Unspeaking stood with Layak and his two blade slaves. Votive tapers of skin written with blood hung from the warriors' armour. The rain ran down them, leaving gritty smears on the lacquered crimson.

'Under the eyes of the gods we pass,' said Layak. The chosen warriors clashed their weapons to their armour. Actaea raised her head, and even though her face did not turn towards him, he could feel her mind fix on him before moving away.

'What do you want, hollow one?' she had asked in her fane of black stone.

'I want nothing,' he replied.

'Then why are you here?'

'The gods guide all,' called Lorgar as the darkness closed over them. He turned his face upwards, eyes closed, black rain running from his gold-dusted features. The cry echoed, the syllables of the words flaking away with each second.

'The gods guide…

'Guide all…

'Gods…

'All…'

Hundreds of devotees gathered on the gantries wailed as the ritual masters cut the throats of the first in line and pushed them into the abyss. The dying humans fell past the platform. Blood pattered on Layak's armour.

'Lorgar did not order you to be here,' Actaea said as he stepped into the shrine. 'Your question is yours alone, I see it in your face.'

He had gone to find her the night before their descent into the webway. She was alone in the fane. It was cut into the shaft wall, its lone door ringed by silver-threaded carvings of scenes alluded to in the Book of Lorgar.

'Let none enter,' he had commanded Kulnar and Hebek as he stepped over the threshold. Darkness filled the spaces within, the only light the glow of his staff and the eyes of his mask. The air inside was foetid and hot. The nostrils of his mask opened to allow him to inhale the scents: decay, blood, sweat and incense. Rot-draped bones covered the floor. Some looked as though they had been neatly butchered, others hacked, a few gnawed. Etched discs of copper hung from the low ceiling on threads. He knew most of the symbols. The fact that he did not know all of them disturbed him more than the force with which they pressed into his mind.

‘He did not send you here,’ Actaea said as she turned towards him with her sightless eyes. ‘And he does not know that you are here. So, Eater of Names – most high and loyal servant of Lorgar, most high amongst the blessed – why do you come with questions?’

Corposant danced on the cables as the platform descended. The lights of the gantries above were growing smaller. The storm-lashed sky was a shrinking circle. Layak listened to the power crackle over the metal. Agony clawed at him from the inside of his mask. He breathed.

‘I see your face,’ she said, reaching out with a bloody hand. He flinched back, even though she was too far away to touch him. ‘You were beautiful once. Do you remember?’

‘No,’ he said.

‘Do you wish to remember?’

‘It is not permitted,’ he said. She tilted her head as though in question.

‘By whom?’

‘It is blasphemy to know.’

The platform halted its descent with a jolt. Layak’s sight snapped back into focus, as though he were waking from a dream. His eyes had been open all the while; he could not close them, the lids having long ago been cut from above his eye sockets. He could feel blood crusting on his lips. Kulnar glanced at him.

Layak felt the slave’s hate boiling behind the obedient query.

Nothing. Layak formed the words in his skull so that Kulnar might hear. *It is nothing.*

Kulnar rotated his gaze back to the distance, and took his hand from the hilt of his sword. The burning cracks on his gauntlet closed.

The platform swayed as Lorgar moved to the edge. Above, the cables reached up to a vanishing point.

‘This is it,’ said the primarch.

Actaea nodded once.

‘It is.’

‘How do we proceed?’

She shrugged. ‘With faith.’

‘Of course,’ he said, and stepped from the platform, and fell into nothingness.

Layak walked to the edge. Blood was still falling from the sacrifices above, mixing with the rain as it ran off the grey of his armour. He looked

down.

‘Is our task blessed in the eyes of the gods?’ he asked Actaea.

‘That is not what you came to ask,’ she replied. Eight corpses covered the floor of the fane. Each one had been pinned to the floor at one of the cardinal points of the octed. None of them had died quickly. Blood drained down runnels in the white marble floor. Actaea stood at the centre of the eight-pointed star. Her robes were mottled with a deeper red, the velvet crusted. ‘You are a high priest of this new age of truth,’ she said. ‘Should you not know the answer? But if you have doubts, taste the augurs for yourself, hollow one.’

She held out a black glass athame. Layak did not take it. Actaea shrugged and dropped the knife. She wiped the back of her hand across her face, leaving a bloody smear across her lips.

‘Is the blessed primarch right? Do we serve the true *will of the gods?’*

‘Truth…’ Actaea said and bit her bloody lip. ‘Truth is not what you want.’

‘Then why are we here?’ he asked.

‘At last, the true question,’ she said.

Layak could feel the gaze of the other warriors on the platform and the burning glare of Actaea watching him as he hesitated. Somehow he knew that she was smiling beneath her hood.

He stepped off the edge, and fell into silence.

Volk

Alarms wailed through the *Iron Blood* as it breached the skin of reality. Volk was halfway up the primary spine arterial as the ship screamed. The pulsing blue of warp transition lights vanished. Amber light blinked in time with the klaxon-blare. Volk felt the deck lurch as force slammed through the superstructure. He bit off a stream of invective, clamped his helm in place and began to run aft. Data spun past his sight as his display meshed with the ship’s tactical output.

Eleven ships had ridden the warp with the *Iron Blood*, a smaller Grand Fleet than was usual but still a force that could have conquered systems. There was the battleship *Defiance*, the fleet carrier *Strontium Dawn* and the three heavy cruisers *Stone Breaker*, *Sisyphus* and *Trident*. The macro-bombardment ship *Enyo* was a block-bodied shadow to the *Iron Blood*, her banks of munition launchers retracted behind the layered panels of her hull.

Two strike cruisers, the *Sceptre of Orestes* and the *Iron Edict*, formed the fleet's vanguard, while a squadron of three frigates, *Maiden*, *Mother* and *Crone*, circled the whole, watchful and swift. All of them had just slammed out of the warp with no warning.

Battle automata maniples folded out of niches to either side of the arterial passage. Scanning beams flickered over Volk, but they let him pass. He quickened his pace. He was alone. No bodyguard or entourage followed him when he walked the *Iron Blood*'s passages.

He ducked through an arch. Slab doors slammed open in front of him as his authorisation codes overrode their lockdown. The ship was still juddering, vibrating with engine power and damage.

He reached one of the primary transport hoists. Pulsing yellow lights surrounded it. He halted for the seconds that it took the doors to open. A hatch opened to his right. He whirled, hand on his bolter.

'Hold!' Argonis came through the hatch opening, hand raised. The Warmaster's emissary was fully armoured but without his cloak or sceptre of office.

'Where is Perturabo?' asked Argonis as he followed.

'With the Navigators,' replied Volk.

The door pistoned shut behind Argonis. Volk triggered the command override on the hoist controls. The platform shot upwards. Forces that would have slammed a mortal to the floor shuddered through Volk as the walls of the shaft blurred past. The hoist was covering a kilometre of hull in under a minute. Iris hatches peeled open above them and slammed shut as they passed.

'Where are we?' asked Argonis.

'Gas drift,' said Volk, still trying to assimilate the data pouring into his eye from the ship systems. 'Nothing here except dying stars and debris, dead and empty.'

'Storm forced us out?' asked Argonis.

Volk shook his head.

The last twenty-four hours of passage had been bad. The warp had gusted into a fury, tugging the *Iron Blood* back even as it sliced onwards. Squalls of weeping and roars and rage had shivered over the fleet's Geller fields, and the twelve ships had struggled to hold together, but they had ridden worse. All of the Navigators in the Grand Fleet had looked into the Black

Oculus; they could thread the eye of the abyss, and storms did not bar their passing.

The walls of the lift shaft trembled. Lights cut off and blinked back on.

‘What caused this?’ growled Argonis. Volk shook his head.

‘I am joining the primarch in the primary Navigator enclave,’ said Volk. Above him he could see the green lights of the shaft roof blinking as they sped closer.

‘He summoned you?’

Volk did not answer. The truth was that he had seen little of the primarch since they had broken from Krade. The passage had been filled with solitary training. With ammunition hoarded for true battle, there had been hours with sword, hammer and axe, battering through servitor drones, or locked into the spinning cage of a flight simulacrum engine. Argonis had joined him for much of that training, matching blade and skill with Volk as the *Iron Blood* rode the edge of the storms. In that time Perturabo had only called for him once.

‘The son of Horus…’ he had said as Volk entered his presence. The primarch was working on his exo-armour with a mind-linked mechadendrite cluster. Welding sparks flared. Bolt drivers spun with a high melody. Servo-arms held armour plates, and fine manipulators wormed into the workings beneath. To Volk it felt strangely like looking at a surgeon operating on his own sinew, the skin peeled and pinned back while the razors did their work. ‘He has the arrogance of his kind, but is he true to the Warmaster?’

‘Would he have been sent to us if he were not?’ Volk asked.

‘Yet it is never the truest lieutenants that are sent on such tasks. Never Abaddon, never Aximand, nor Maloghurst.’

‘You think he has doubts, lord?’

‘I think he is flawed.’

Volk hesitated, and then nodded.

‘Perhaps,’ he said.

‘Find out for certain, and if he is, learn what weakness is in his heart.’

Volk bowed his head but paused as he turned to go.

‘Lord, what purpose does knowing such things about our allies serve?’

The machine array froze in motion for a second, the lightning of the welding torches holding above the metal.

‘The same purpose that every deed and life has in this age,’ Perturabo said. ‘As a weapon.’

The hoist slammed to a stop. Hazard-striped doors pistoned open in front of them as they entered the Navigator enclave. Human screams replaced the sound of alarms.

A small warship might only require a single Navigator to steer it through the warp. Larger ships, though, required a cluster of them, so that the weight of guiding such a large mass through the immaterium could be spread between them, and in case one of them died or went insane. Such occurrences were not uncommon. For a ship like the *Iron Blood*, the Navigator presence was a whole branch of a house, or rather it had been. Things had changed after the voyage into the Eye of Terror.

The *Iron Blood*’s Navigators had looked into the dark of the universe’s heart. Those who survived had been… altered.

Volk strode down a corridor lined with seamless brushed steel. Faces carved from green jade and white alabaster decorated the walls. All of the sculpted faces were blindfolded, their jaws open to show carved teeth framing mouths of shadow. One of the Iron Circle stood before the doors to the Navigation sanctuary, but it stood aside for Volk and Argonis with a clank of pistons and a pulse of scanning light.

Cacophony filled the chamber beyond the door. The light of fire and stars poured in through the three triangular viewports that formed the chamber’s front and side walls. There had been chairs for the Navigators, once, but they were long gone. Cages were suspended between the ceiling and floor. Figures hung between the bars, limbs splayed. They looked human if you did not let your eye linger. Each of them had an iron mask riveted to the top of their skull, its blank surface broken only by an iris shutter on the forehead. The screams were coming from the three figures. Balloons of skin inflated in mutated throats, and openings that looked like gills rippled in between ribs. Perturabo stood before them. He was not looking at the screaming Navigators. He was looking at the void.

‘Lord Perturabo,’ said Argonis. ‘Why do–’

‘We could not go further,’ he replied. ‘There is a… pressure in the warp.’

‘The storms…’ began Argonis.

‘Not the storms.’ The Lord of Iron gestured at the Navigators. ‘Those who have looked into the Black Oculus can see the calm in storms. They can see everything, but something blinded them, emissary.’

Volk realised that the Navigators had stopped screaming. He could hear the thump-hiss of the tubes and machines linked to their cages. In the distance, the ship's klaxons shouted on.

'What blinded them?' asked Argonis.

'Fever children…' gasped one Navigator. 'Fever children…'

And then the Navigators were all saying the words, moaning them over and over again.

'Fever children, fever children, fever children, fever children, fever children…'

Volk flinched as the direct link to the *Iron Blood*'s command systems began to gush data into his eyes and ears. He felt his hearts kick and his breath still in his lungs.

'Lord, auspex systems are reading multiple ship engine signatures,' said Volk. 'Warships. They have lit weapons. They are broadcasting hails…' Volk paused.

'Fever children…' hissed the Navigators.

'Who are they?'

Perturabo must have somehow been absorbing the same information, though Volk could not see how. The Lord of Iron was looking at Argonis. He had gone very still. Not a single muscle moved on his face. The weapon pods on his arms were silent.

'They say that they are of the Sixteenth Legion,' said Volk. 'They say they are of the Sons of Horus.'

SEVEN

Maloghurst

‘All entrances are sealed,’ said Sota-Nul. Maloghurst nodded an acknowledgement and continued to take the objects he had brought and lay them out on the floor. The tech-witch’s eye-lenses shrank as they focused on the items.

‘Sealed or not, the doors will not hold our brothers out once they realise that we are here,’ said Ekaddon.

The captain had removed his helm and was watching Maloghurst, eyes glinting coldly as they touched the athame and the inscribed silver coin.

‘Then it is well that I have you both to watch for such a possibility, and to divert them if they should grow suspicious.’

Maloghurst looked down at the ritual instruments. They were relatively few given the potency of what he was attempting: the silver athame; the coin; the small pouch of human skin filled with bone ash; the eye of a still-living man, floating in a jar of blood-threaded oil; red lumps of incense in a small, iron censer; and a black-glazed clay cup. All was just as Layak had told him and as his research had confirmed.

‘What is it that you are going to action/do?’ asked Sota-Nul. There was a dry edge to the words that made Maloghurst think of thirst.

‘A little late for doubts and clarifications, don’t you think?’ he said, picking up the athame. He looked up, eyes fixed on the immobile figure of Horus.

The primarch was still, a carven figure on a throne. The light of the stars glimmered behind the dais, distorted by the crackling of ghost energy as the ship slid into the warp. Blast shutters began to fold down over the viewport, an eyelid closing over the sight of the Sea of Souls. ‘As I said, I am going to talk to the Warmaster,’ he said.

‘You already tried sorcery,’ said Ekaddon. ‘Tried and failed.’

‘Worried that you might have made the wrong bet, boy?’

Ekaddon did not answer.

Maloghurst reached up and unfastened the rebreather mask from his face. He opened the jar containing the eye and lit the incense. Grey smoke coiled into the air, carrying with it the scent of spun sugar and burnt hair. The bone ash became a circle around him, the last of it a blessing for his eyelids.

He had prepared for this for twenty-five hours. Patterns of words and sacred numbers ran through his subconscious.

He ran his fingers around the inside of his gorget.

‘Come here,’ he said, gesturing to Ekaddon.

‘I did not–’

‘You will do as I command!’ he snarled.

Ekaddon froze, eyes flashing with cold anger.

‘You will do as I command or everything… *everything* we have done, and everything you dream of, will be ashes. You want to rise? You want to feel destiny set its hand on your head? Then obey, boy.’ Maloghurst held his gaze, hearing his breath rasp between his teeth.

Ekaddon did not blink, but the anger was vanishing under control.

‘When the blood falls, catch it and bear it to the Warmaster.’ He held the black-glazed cup out to Ekaddon.

‘The blood…?’

‘Yes,’ said Maloghurst. ‘You will know when. Touch the blood to his lips.’

‘That is all?’ asked Ekaddon.

Maloghurst grinned.

‘That is all.’ He knelt, settling himself in front of the instruments. He drew a breath and heard it rattle as it touched his lungs. ‘Now you might want to step back.’ He closed his eyes.

His mind sank into itself.

He felt the fingers of the warp reach from behind his awareness and tug him into its embrace.

Words burned in his thoughts, old and ancient words that vibrated as they tried to slip the leash of his will.

His bare right hand found the eye in the jar and brought it up to his mouth.

This could kill you.… came a smiling voice from the back of his thoughts. He stamped it down.

He could feel his mouth working, his tongue forming sounds as he bit and chewed, but he could not hear them.

This will kill you…

He was burning and freezing, falling through infinity even as he tried to fly.

This could destroy everything…

The words were threads of fire and darkness in him, sucking in all of his will and sensation.

But what choice is there?

Somewhere out beyond the boiling agony of fire and ice, the air in the throne room was twisting, writhing with winds as the substance of being tried to shake off what he was doing. And out further, like the hunger of a black star, was the Warmaster.

He willed his awareness back into being, felt his left hand rise, felt the athame's handle in his fingers.

A final syllable fell into place in his thoughts.

He brought the knife up and opened his own throat.

He felt himself begin to fall, black psychoactive ice forming and splintering from his limbs as blood gushed out of his throat. His mind was contracting, becoming a sphere without dimensions, a ball of being bound by rings of burning iron. Somewhere he was trying to breathe.

Warmth…

Red…

Warmth…

He could feel himself being lifted, though he knew that his body still lay on the floor pouring its life fluid onto the ash-scattered iron. Something huge, something so vast that it did not have edges, was rushing to meet him. He wanted to scream, but he had left his mouth behind.

The darkness was a wall before him, blank, lightless, extending up and down and to every edge.

'Hello, Mal,' said a voice.

Layak

Sound.

First there was sound.

Voices. Words. Whispers. Cries. Songs.

Layak fell through the sounds, feeling them tear at him, pulling at him as he passed, dragging him back, pleading and threatening.

Higher and higher the sound rose, never ending or beginning. He heard languages last spoken when the galaxy was an ember in the belly of the universe. He heard pain. He heard sorrow and their anger rolling on, the deep currents of hidden rivers that would never reach the sea.

Senses rebuilt around his awareness: pain, splintering in its intensity; taste and smell, laden with the grit of ash and the copper of blood; the feeling of his body and its wrapping of armour. Sight came last, rising slowly before his mind as the sounds fell into the background.

Gossamer light unfolded in front of him, reaching to a vast height, curving into the walls of a circular tunnel. Beyond those walls a starless night turned. Mist flowed around his feet and hid the distance. Angry black-and-red stains bubbled and vanished in the mist. Layak's mask was burning against his face.

He turned his head slowly. The tunnel slid against his sight. Distances compressed and expanded as his view changed. The runes spinning in his helm display crumpled as they tried to form. The tunnel looked at once barely wide enough for five men to walk abreast along it, and vast enough that a spacecraft could slide down its gullet.

He had no idea where he was. He had read of the webway, but those fragments of myth did little for him as he faced the reality of the labyrinth realm. He wondered if the door from Orcus always opened to the same location for all who passed through.

'We should move.' Actaea's voice echoed flatly from beside Layak. He whirled, staff spinning in his hand.

She stood a pace from him. Her hood was lowered and her head cocked to one side, as though listening. Her face was still, her eyes no longer white but crimson from edge to edge. Kulnar and Hebek stood behind her, their heads moving from side to side like dogs.

Lorgar was there too, suddenly present, as though Layak's view of the empty passage had been a painting on a curtain that had been pulled away.

'We are forty-five,' said Lorgar, his voice both loud and distant. Layak turned, his eyes moving over the ash-dusted armour of his own warriors. There were the veterans of the Kalteth, their armour edged in dirty gold taken from the hoards of dead kings. The Unktuth were already forming a circle, their autocannons tracking the coiling mist. The butchers of Gadeth

and the bone-hung brothers of Grolth were there, moving slowly, as though waking from a dream. For a second, all seemed as it should. Then Layak looked again, counting at a glance, holding on to his recognition of each warrior. Two were gone. Gone so that he could not be certain they had ever existed.

‘The crossing claims its due,’ said Actaea. Then she said again, ‘We should move.’

Lorgar turned in place, eyes glittering.

‘Fascinating…’ he said. Lorgar, like Layak, had not stepped into the webway before. He had sent tens of thousands through the breaches into the labyrinth dimension: warriors of his own Legion, World Eaters, martyrs of a hundred cults. But he had never crossed into it himself.

‘Fascinating and lethal,’ said Actaea. Her shoulders had hunched, and her head was twitching in different directions. ‘There are… forces here that we should not underestimate.’

‘I can feel them,’ said Lorgar.

‘Which direction do we go?’ asked Layak.

‘The direction does not matter,’ said Actaea. ‘Just the destination.’

She pulled a shallow bronze bowl from the folds of her robes, cupped it in her hands and turned to Lorgar.

‘Blood calls out to blood,’ she said.

Lorgar raised his left hand. The gauntlet released with a murmur of machinery. He flexed the bare fingers as he drew a narrow blade from his waist. He closed his eyes and breathed a silent word that rocked Layak back on his heels. Black veins bulged across the surface of the primarch’s skin. Lorgar slashed the blade over his palm. Blood poured out and splashed into the bronze bowl. Actaea was hissing words that smoked as they met the air. Lorgar closed his fist. Black runnels squeezed between his clenched fingers. Layak could taste the sorcery shivering through the air. The walls of the tunnel around them rippled. Red lightning flashed in the mist. The bowl was glowing cherry-red with heat. Actaea’s fingers were burning, but she held steady. Lorgar held his fist closed, his face threaded with the black veins under powdered gold. Then he opened his hand and stepped back. The last drop of blood struck the surface of the bowl.

‘Speak his name, lord!’ shouted Actaea. ‘Speak it now!’

‘Fulgrim, third-born soul of our father, brother in blood, bound in fate, I seek thee!’

The syllables rolled like thunder. Layak felt the floor twist over as the passage contracted and writhed. Light flashed above the bronze bowl. Actaea was a statue, her mouth open as though she were frozen in mid-scream.

Silence fell like a hammer.

Layak could not see the passage walls. A bruise-coloured mist surrounded them, lit by a defuse twilight.

‘I see…’ breathed Actaea. She lifted the bowl in her left hand, and in her right she held a spherical bottle of crystal. She poured the blood into it and sealed the top with a silver stopper. Layak felt his eyes want to move away even as he looked at it. The oracle held the bottle in front of her face. ‘The path opens,’ said Actaea. ‘Stay within sight of me. Don’t look back. Whatever you do, do not look back.’

She began to walk, and the mist coiled in her wake. The Word Bearers followed, eyes glowing in the gloom. Layak heard voices behind him, hissing whispers in alien tongues. Spectral hands clawed and caressed his back. He felt the instinct to turn tug at his will. His mask clawed at his face. Ghost sensations walked up his nerves. Lurid green sparks played over his staff and the wards of his armour. He could feel etheric pressure wrapping around him. It was not an attack, not the constricting coils of a single presence trying to invade one’s mind. It was more like sinking to the bottom of the sea as the light of the surface receded, and the black water became a crushing weight.

‘This place is…’ he began to growl.

‘Lethal,’ finished Actaea without pausing in her steps. ‘Why do you think that those you send to war in here are blessed as martyrs?’

‘Then why use it on this journey?’ said Layak, through gritted teeth.

‘Because it is swift,’ said Lorgar, ‘and the only way of reaching where we are going with both stealth and certainty.’

They walked on.

Time faded out of awareness. Layak was no longer sure if the moments between thoughts and steps were seconds or weeks. He had experienced the mockery of time under the influence of the sacred realm, but this felt different, deliberate. Designed. He could feel himself shivering and called to mind the words of protection over the predation of spirits. The formulae lit in his mind, but the only answer was a hissing chuckle of words from the edge of hearing.

‘You understand what they are saying, of course?’ Lorgar’s voice pulled him back into focus. Somehow Layak had moved forwards, so that he was just to the side of the primarch. Actaea was a red shadow three paces in front of them.

‘I do, my lord,’ said Layak. ‘They are speaking in the tongues of the eldar.’

‘Of course,’ said Lorgar. ‘And what are they saying?’

This place… It was…

He tried to focus.

‘That we will die. That we are going the wrong way. That we should turn back.’ Layak felt the sacred agony of his mask bite deeper, the blurred edge of his thoughts sharpening. He could hardly think through the pain.

‘Why do you ask, lord? You must understand them better than I.’

‘I do, but they say different things to me.’ Layak felt his stride pause. Something in the exchange was wrong. His thoughts were wrong. ‘Do you want to know what they say to me?’

Layak stopped. The whispers that followed him had vanished. The ghost touch of the presence behind him was gone. He could not hear the sound of his brothers marching in his wake. He needed to look behind. In front of him, the red shape of Actaea moved away deeper into the mist. Lorgar was still there, though.

‘What do the whispers say to you?’ asked Layak.

Lorgar stopped just ahead and turned to look back at Layak.

‘They say that you are lost, and that you will die before you see the light of another sun,’ said the face of Lorgar. Layak jerked backwards, his staff rising. The face of Lorgar was splitting, its form dissolving into nothing as it opened its mouth wide to scream silence.

‘Kulnar!’ he shouted. ‘Hebek!’

But the words found only echoes of themselves. He was alone in the mist, and the laughter in the back of his mind was a cry on the wind.

Volk

The gunship that slid onto the deck looked as though it had been pulled from the bottom of the sea. Knotted growth crawled over its fuselage. Bulbous scabs bloomed in the angles between wings and fuselage, and hung beneath its chin. Warm steam vented from rust-ringed pores in its belly as it settled into place. To Volk’s eye it looked less like a machine than a clump

of diseased coral. He watched it with the targeting runes of his helm painting it in a pulsing amber. He had his boltgun in his hand. Beside him, twenty siege Terminators held position, shoulders hunched beneath missile racks, their bolters levelled.

Perturabo stood beside Volk, the Iron Circle a wall to his sides. Weapon pods on the hangar bay walls and ceiling rotated and locked their aim on the gunship. They were unnecessary. A fraction of the arrayed might and firepower would reduce the gunship to wreckage in a heartbeat, but an excess of strength had another power all of its own.

Argonis stood in front of Perturabo and Volk, cloaked and helmed, his sceptre of office in hand. He still had his weapons, but even in the hands of a warrior like the Unscarred that meant nothing. The firepower trained on the gunship was also watching him. Argonis glanced over his shoulder at Volk. The vox clicked as a private link between them opened. Static breathed into Volk's ears, but Argonis said nothing and, after a second, looked back at the gunship. The emissary had assumed a stone-like silence ever since they had received hails from the vessels that claimed to be of the Sons of Horus.

The ramp beneath the gunship's chin released with a creak. Flakes of rust and calcified bone fell to the decking. The autoloaders in Perturabo's armour cycled. Yellow steam swirled in the space beyond. A shape lumbered into view. Volk instinctively raised his weapon as it emerged into the light. Like the gunship, its form was crusted and spiked with coral-like growths. Scabrous boils the size of a fist dotted its torso. Pale fronds darted from tiny holes to lick the air. Beneath the growth, Volk could just identify the lines of Tartaros-pattern Terminator plate. It was the thing's head that held his eyes, though. It was withered, the flesh sucked out of its features so that the parchment skin hung off its skull. Its mouth was a razor line slashed across the dry creases. It had three eyes, two lidless and yellow with cataracts, the third a blood-red orb set in its forehead. It blinked with its third eye as it looked at the assembled host.

Argonis was the first to speak.

'Who are you?'

The figure did not look at him but turned its head in the socket of its armour.

'The storm spoke and we answered,' it said. Volk had expected a hiss or a dry rattle, but the voice was surprisingly strong.

‘You know who I am?’ said Perturabo.

The thing nodded, its armour creaking as it shifted posture.

‘You are the Lord of Iron. You are the warrior who passed through the Eye’s pupil and saw the truth. You are the breaker and ender of worlds. Yes… We know who you are.’

‘What have you done to our Navigators?’ growled Volk.

‘We…’ said the figure, shifting its gaze but still not looking at Volk, as though it were not seeing the same space or disposition of warriors as everyone else. ‘We have done nothing. The storm brought us here and so here we are.’ It paused, and then its head turned slowly back like a cog rotating in a machine. Its red eye fixed on Perturabo.

A murmur of weapons cycling to the point of firing filled the air. Perturabo shook his head.

‘The storm brought you?’

‘We are of the storm. It is our sire, we are its voice.’

Argonis stepped forwards, a bolt pistol in his hand. He levelled the gun.

‘Your name,’ he growled.

‘I was named Khalek,’ said the figure, holding its gaze on Perturabo. ‘I was called the Chieftain of the Hekora. I was called a Luna Wolf, and am now of the Sons of Horus.’

Argonis was very still.

‘Khalek has not been seen for three years,’ he said. ‘His force was lost in translation to Novageddon.’

‘And now we are found.’

Argonis’ finger tensed on the trigger of his bolt pistol.

Perturabo took a single step forwards, a targeting beam flicking from a shoulder-mounted weapon pod to hold steady on Argonis’ gun hand. Argonis did not fire. Perturabo held the targeting beam still. After a long moment the emissary dropped his aim and stepped back.

‘How were you sent?’ said Perturabo to Khalek.

‘We are the storm, its sevenfold winds are our sire, and we its children. Where it carries us, we go. We are its voice. It took us from the graveyard of ships in its heart, took us and gave us life again, and so we come to speak for it.’

‘The warp…’ breathed Volk. ‘It is… in them.’

‘The storm is within all,’ said Khalek.

‘What did the storm send you to say?’ asked Perturabo.

‘It sent us to make you an offer. There is a throne for you, Lord of Iron,’ said Khalek, and he shivered as he spoke. Volk noticed a flash of red on the paper-dry lips. ‘A throne that weeps with the tears of your enemies. And with the throne, a crown that once on your brow will make the iron of your blood eternal. You are rotting, Lord of Iron. You layer metal on your skin and bind the killing edges closer to you, because they make you feel the strength that is bleeding out of you. You feel this truth. You know it in the fever-tremble of your skin.’

Khalek’s body was moving, his shoulders heaving, as though the muscles inside his armour were writhing even as his voice held steady. ‘The Sixfold Prince has bitten deep and feasted long. The wound festers within your soul. You are dying. Your iron is rust.’

Perturabo did not move, but Volk thought that the shadows deepened in the hollows of his face.

Khalek’s convulsions ceased. His chin was wet with blood.

‘You resist,’ said Khalek. ‘You fight, but that only steals more from you. You seek the Son of Blood, the Dog of Bones snapping in its brass collar. Father Storm sees this – it sees and knows that if you find the Hound of Red Sands, you will die. You are weak, and he is beyond your weakness. He will not yield. He will not obey. He will test your metal, and it will be wanting. The Father sees, the Father knows.’ Khalek took a rasping breath and bowed his head. ‘You can rise, lord. You can be eternal, unbreaking, unbreakable.’

‘Is that the extent of what you have come to say?’ asked Perturabo.

Khalek raised and dipped his head.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Good,’ said Perturabo.

The air screamed. Beams of incandescent energy and streams of rounds burned through the space between Perturabo and Khalek. The warrior vanished. Armour plating, flesh and metal tore into shreds and vapour.

Volk’s visor dimmed to dull the blaze of light. Perturabo was a blur, charging forwards through the flames. The rest of the Iron Warriors froze on the point of firing as the primarch passed in front of them.

Khalek’s gunship was trying to rise from the deck. Thrusters coughed dirty jets of flame. Cannon mounts spun, grinding bone and rust flakes from their fittings. The Lord of Iron struck the front of the gunship as it rose from the deck. He had not had a weapon in his hands; the hammer *Forgebreaker*

still rested in the hands of one of the Iron Circle, but it did not matter. Power wreathed the primarch's fists as the first blow landed.

Armour shattered. Lightning arced out. The gunship dipped, its nose shattered, oil and clotted blood showering to the deck. A broken gun mount twitched in its chin. Perturabo punched into the wound. An explosion thumped into the air. The gunship burst apart. Shreds of corroded armour spun out, rattling off the shields of the Iron Circle as they surged to their master's side. The cloud of flame rolled upwards, smoke curdling black at its edges. The air reeked of charring meat and melting metal. Perturabo walked from the fire. Soot darkened his armour. Fire glinted from its edges, and for a second it seemed to breathe in the inferno.

'All ships engage,' he said, his voice carrying over the fading roar of the explosion. 'Make ready for warp translation on my command.'

'The Navigators…' began Argonis.

'We will face the storm.'

Volk's augmetic eye flickered with a sudden cascade of tactical data.

'Lord, they are launching boarding craft and torpedoes.' Volk blinked, his eyelid closing over the metal sphere of his right eye. It did not interrupt the flow of command data. 'There are hundreds of them…'

'Launch interceptors, all squadrons,' said Perturabo, halting in his stride, suddenly still. His gaze was hollow. 'Burn them from the void.'

EIGHT

Maloghurst

He opened his mouth to scream.

Dust… He could taste dust… and the smoke of campfires.

He tried to stand… and realised that he was already standing.

He turned and looked at where the voice had come from.

Horus Lupercal stood next to him, hands resting on a balustrade of white marble. The engine fires of starships marked the night sky above them. Lights twinkled on the dark plain beneath the high balcony they stood on. A wind stirred the flames of a torch that burned in a bracket beneath them.

‘Lord…’ began Maloghurst.

‘What are you doing, Mal?’ asked Horus without looking up.

Maloghurst was about to speak, but then paused. He looked around. He touched the stone of the balustrade. It was hard and unyielding. He looked at his gauntlet. Grey-white ceramite encased his fingers.

‘You should not be here,’ said Horus.

‘Where is here, my lord?’

Horus straightened, a frown darkening his features for a second. Maloghurst realised that the primarch was arrayed not in the storm-green of the Sons of Horus, nor the black of the Master of the New Imperium. His armour was the white of days long past, the white of the Luna Wolves.

‘It is Ullanor, Mal,’ said Horus. ‘Can you not see? It is Ullanor, and tomorrow my father will do me great honour.’

Maloghurst looked up at Horus. The face was just as… No, it was not. It was somehow stronger, untouched by the concerns that had been there on the eve of the triumph. It was Horus serene, the image of what should have been rather than what was. He watched as the night filled the quiet of the plain, and he stood alone.

‘Warmaster…’ breathed Horus. ‘I am to be called Warmaster, Mal. Tomorrow, here, in this place, my father will pass command of the Great Crusade to me.’

Maloghurst blinked. The sensation of the wind on his skin felt real. Very real. Like the edge of something sharp pressed into his skin.

‘He says that He needs to return to Terra. There are matters that He needs to attend to. Matters…’ The word slid out and peeled away in the wind. ‘He takes Rogal with Him.’

‘Sire…’

‘Total command, complete authority to conquer by my own hand or others. Such an honour, Mal, such a show of trust…’

‘Sire, I am not here–’

‘Then why does it feel empty, a task unfinished to be tidied away?’

Maloghurst stepped closer.

‘Lord, this is not real. Ullanor was long ago. There is not much time…’

Horus’ head swung around. The dark sky shuddered to red dawn and then to brilliant blue. A burning sun arced across the sky. The plain of lights became a sea of faces and the flash of armour. The balcony shook with the tread of Titans. War-horns blared, the sound driving away the wind. The might of mankind marched and cheered as the sun raced into darkness, and the stars lit red in the returned night, and Horus was no longer clad in grey-white but loomed, a darkness given form by the glint of edges and the fraying of shadow.

‘Maloghurst…’ breathed the Warmaster, his voice rolling and blending with the cry of war-horns.

Maloghurst stepped back. The air was gone from his lungs. Heat was scorching his flesh. Pressure squeezed his bones. He could hear laughter, high and shrill, piercing his mind. Then the Warmaster was turning away, black against a sky that rolled with red thunder clouds.

‘You send this shade? What mockery do you make of yourselves?’

And he laughed, though Maloghurst heard the hollowness in the thunder.

Horus’ armour was still the grey-white of the Luna Wolves, but now it was streaked with soot and blood. The balcony was gone, the ground beneath him the grey granules of a city made ash by a firestorm.

‘Lord,’ he called. ‘Lord, listen to me. I am Maloghurst. I am your servant.’

Horus turned his head. Maloghurst almost fell.

‘You are a lie. No one is here. This is the wasteland of the gods.’

Horus looked up, and suddenly his presence seemed to shrink, to become something closer to a man. The shadows drained into the features of his face, the buzzing heat of his presence cooling. The red clouds and the spirals of ash froze. He looked at Maloghurst, and where there had been fire, Maloghurst thought there was now pain in the primarch’s eyes.

‘Mal?’

‘It is I, lord,’ said Maloghurst.

‘But you cannot be here…’

‘Lord, do you remember the *Vengeful Spirit?* Your wound…’

But Horus was shaking his head.

‘The *Vengeful Spirit* was long ago,’

‘No, sire,’ said Maloghurst. ‘It is now. At this moment you sit on your throne, and I am there with you. Do you not remember?’

‘Remember…’ said Horus. ‘I remember everything. I remember the earth turning under the first plough. I see the first sword rise from the quench water. I hold the ember of the dying sun in my hand.’

‘You were wounded…’

‘The wolf bit deep but not deep enough. A scratch, a reminder that even my brothers still have teeth.’

Maloghurst shook his head.

‘It opened again, at Beta-Garmon. You were bleeding. You were–’

‘Dying.’

‘Yes.’ Maloghurst paused. ‘You still are.’

Horus did not reply.

‘Ullanor…’ said Horus slowly, and around them the clouds and ashen wind stirred for an instant and then were still again. ‘Ullanor…’

‘You remember, then, you remember the orders you gave?’

The primarch frowned, and for a second the shadows grew again, veins spidering under skin.

‘Orders? No, but Ullanor waits for me, out there. It waits for me.’

Horus began to walk. The ash was silent under his tread, the grey distance reaching before him.

Maloghurst felt his own thoughts swirl.

Ullanor waits for me…

Despite all he knew of the warp, and all the steps that he had taken to reach this point, he felt uncertain. Had he really been on the *Vengeful*

Spirit? Was he there still, bleeding on the floor?

He began to walk after his Warmaster.

‘Sire, what is happening?’

Horus looked at him. The distance of the frozen expanse clung to his eyes.

‘There are prices, Mal, prices that have to be paid. I have to go.’

‘You cannot mean…’

‘I am not dying.’ He was still walking. The curtain of ash blurred his shape. The wind gusted back into force. Maloghurst raised a hand as burning embers stung his eyes. He blinked. Horus was a fading smudge in the swirl, moving further away.

‘Sire!’

‘I am not dying, Mal,’ came Horus’ voice, a thread coming from out of sight. ‘I am fighting.’

Layak

The spectre shrieked into Layak’s mind. One of the six eyes in his mask cracked. He roared a name of unmaking. Fire wreathed his armour and staff. The spectre spun past him. It was a nothing, a sketch of a fast movement and a screaming face. It still had claws though. Its touch grazed through Layak as he swung his burning staff. Ice exploded through him under its touch. His skin split and bled. His mind was a spiral of images of voices.

‘You are a pure soul, Layak…’

‘You are a hollow man…’

‘What is your name…?’

His mind called names and formulae, pouring their bladed shapes through his memory. Nothing answered. Nothing. He was falling.

‘Your gods have forsaken you…’

‘You were brought only as a sacrifice…’

‘Why do you think they are blessed as martyrs?’

The flesh of his face was burning. The metal of his mask was writhing. The hooks on the inside were teeth biting into his flesh. His staff was falling from his hand. His mind spun and spun without centre. His hands came up to his mask.

‘Who were you?’

‘You must have been someone once…’

‘I am no one.’

The mask came free in his hands. Blood poured from the clawed ruin of his face. The mist was a wall pressed against his eyes. The fire wreathing his armour guttered.

‘Now,’ said a distant cry on the wind. ‘Now you really are ours.’

He looked up. A face was looking down at him. It was young but made strong by gene-alchemy rather than time. A single black flame marked each of its cheeks. The eyes were dark. Ash-grey armour ringed its neck.

‘I do not know who you are,’ he gasped in a voice that did not sound like his.

‘Oh, but you do,’ replied a figure. ‘I was born within the light of the star that shines on Terra. That light… It used to come through the viewports, when the station came out of eclipse.’

Layak listened, frozen in place by the figure’s words.

‘Even through all the dust and grime, you could see the light. They used to say that it was dangerous, that if the film on the crystal was damaged that the light would kill… It didn’t matter. What was dying compared to seeing that light? I was alone then, a child growing to a man without memories of those that made me, just the instincts that had kept an innocent soul alive in a void-bound city of rust.’

‘Be silent,’ he snarled, tasting the weakness of the words even as they came to his tongue.

The grey-armoured figure did not move, its face tranquil. Layak could not look away. That still gaze was the world, the words louder than thoughts, softer than ash.

‘They found me. I was the last alive. They asked me if I believed in gods. Gods… They had come because of the gods. The gods were everywhere. There were the shrines at every passage junction piled with offerings – scraps of cloth, bright strings of pressure washers, tiny bones. Under the rubbish you could see the gods. They were made of old glass, dusty metal and wires. There were hundreds of them. Cal’dur’ha, the Giver of Breath. Su’nesh Janek, the Lady of Lightning. Vol’Teon, the Beginner, and so on, their names gibberish, but their power total. Their priest-gangers rattled with amulets. You could hear it when they came for a killing. Sacrifice, they called it, but it was just murder. The only thing I could remember from before I was alone was a priest-ganger with a star inked on his face and a pendant of blood swinging from a cord on his knife arm…’

Layak thought he saw images flower with the words, fractured, stained-glass visions of a boy who lived in shadows.

‘All of that ended when they came. Everything became fire, and the gangers screamed as they burned. They found me because I came out of hiding to watch the gods burn. I was weeping. They saw me. I did not run. They were huge. Giants in grey with fire in their fists. They did not kill me, even though they had killed everyone else. They asked me why I wept.’ The figure reached out a hand, the fingers open, as though to run them over Layak’s cheek. ‘I told them. They took me with them. They changed me. They remade me. And I saw the true light of the sun, and burned false gods. I was given purpose, and I found myself in the flames. I had the truth and that was all that mattered.’

‘I do not…’ gasped Layak. He was a creature of control, his world built of power, but in that moment he felt flayed, his mind empty of the will to resist. ‘I do not know you.’

‘No,’ said the figure. ‘You are a slave. A bearer of an empty name, a creature where once there was a man. It would be kind to say that this is a blessing, that you will have peace.’ Layak could see through the fingers. ‘But I was never kind, was I?’

A silver dagger sliced through the spectral figure’s throat. Blackness boiled through it. It slid backwards, bulging and billowing like smoke caught in a gale. A high shriek rose, ululating as it echoed and echoed.

A real, physical hand came out of the mist and grabbed Layak’s arm. He rose, muscles responding before his mind had formed the judgement. He looked up into the blank gaze of Hebek as the blade slave pulled him to his feet.

‘Move!’ said Actaea.

His blade slaves stood to either side of the oracle. She still had the crystal bottle in her hand, but she was turning her head, scanning the mist with blind eyes. The silver dagger in the other hand was tarnishing as he looked at it.

His staff was still in his hand, his mask in the other. He looked at Actaea.

‘It is all right,’ she snapped. ‘I can’t see your precious face, remember?’

He brought the mask up, and it clamped back into place.

‘Phantasms,’ he snarled, as his thoughts reformed.

‘Follow, fast,’ said Actaea. She began to run. Layak followed, pacing the woman after only two strides.

‘Where is the primarch?’ called Layak.

‘Where we all are, Hollow One,’ she said, panting. ‘Lost.’

Volk

The Lightning Crow speared into the dark. Volk’s helmet display lit with target runes. The oncoming swarm was a pulsing cloud of threat markers. Beyond them the dust seemed to coil and billow. Ochre and emerald clouds folded into ghost faces, eyes shining with the fire of withering stars. Warships surrounded the *Iron Blood*’s fleet in a loose cage. Volk’s tactical feed registered twenty-five, and another ten ghosted at the edge of auspex range. Scabs of crusted growth hid what form they had once possessed. Some were fusions of craft, hulls welded together by metal that had grown through them like cancerous bone. Others had flowered with bulbous tumours that nested gun emplacements in open cysts. And all of them were vomiting ordnance and assault craft into the void.

‘*A lot for us to kill,*’ Argonis’ voice crackled over the vox. A glance over Volk’s left shoulder found the emissary’s interceptor outlined in blue, synchronised squadron data spinning in a halo around it. The craft was a Xiphon, smaller and faster than Volk’s Lightning Crow, but with a smaller payload. And 786-1-1 was fully armed. The magazines of the Legion might be almost drained, but if they did not survive this engagement then it would not matter how few bullets they had left.

‘Let’s hope you are still as good a killer as you were,’ said Volk.

‘*And you, brother,*’ said Argonis. Volk blinked at the blank sincerity in the words.

Volk had not been ordered into the fight, but he did not need to be. He was a warrior and before anything else he existed to fight. Perturabo had not commented on his choice. He was not sure if the primarch even thought of it as an important detail. He had been pulling himself into his strike fighter when Argonis’ voice had clicked in his helmet vox.

‘*I will have your shadow, Iron Talon,*’ he had said, the old call sign an evocation of a time that existed now only in memory.

‘As you will,’ Volk had replied.

In the void, Volk felt the roar of engines tingle down his spine as they pushed to the edge of the engagement envelope. Dozens of other craft were expanding out from the Iron Warriors ships to meet the enemy swarm. The warships were coming about, locking into a diamond formation, guns

charged but not yet firing. At the edge of Volk's helmet display, a timer was counting down to the warp translation.

'*Targets two-eight-five by three-five-seven,*' said Argonis.

'I see them. Lock and engage.'

Argonis' interceptor peeled over. Starlight caught the eagle feathers etched in gold on the black-and-green fuselage. Volk matched the move. It felt familiar, like picking up an old sword. Out here he did not have command of a Grand Flight. All of his brothers had remained on Krade. If they would ever reach the muster at Ullanor he did not know. He should have felt diminished, he knew, but he did not. As the chime of weapon locks filled his ears and the force of his turn pressed into his flesh, he felt suddenly as though something had briefly been returned to him.

Three pinpricks of light sparked in his sight, bracketed in amber. He blinked. A magnified view unfolded in his left eye. Each of the dots was a single craft, all of them several times the size of either his or Argonis' machines.

'Three targets, coming in fast, split and cut,' he said into the vox. Argonis flipped his interceptor into a wide curve that would cut across the enemy craft as they came on. Volk split in the opposite direction.

Hostile weapon locks chimed in his ears.

Behind him the first munitions from the enemy fleet were punching through the sphere of fighters and burning towards the *Iron Blood*. The fleet's turrets opened up. Fire gridded the dark. Torpedoes exploded. Plasma painted the night.

Volk's three targets accelerated. Ragged cones of fire breathed from their engines. They were not evading, he realised. None of the enemy craft were evading. The entire enemy fleet was closing on the *Iron Blood* and its sisters, shrinking the sphere around them. They could not survive, Volk realised. Even with greater numbers they were running straight into the Iron Warriors' guns. Whatever kills they took would be bought at the cost of their annihilation. It was a plan that made no sense.

Turrets on the three enemy craft pivoted. Volk slammed 786-1-1 over into a spiralling roll. A storm of las-fire reached for him. He was already spinning. The targets were live in front of his eyes, bracketed between him and Argonis' interceptor. Target locks chimed in his ears. His finger squeezed the fire control. Rockets blasted from his wings. On the opposite side of the trio Argonis loosed a cluster of munitions and slammed his

interceptor into a climb. Volk mirrored him a second later. The rockets ran to their targets and punched the enemy craft from the void. Corroded armour and bond growth vanished in spheres of dirty light.

‘*Simple,*’ breathed Argonis over the vox, as the pair slid back into formation.

‘Does killing your own Legion give you pride, brother?’

The volume of space around them glittered and strobed with explosions. The running counter at the edge of Volk’s sight was flashing down towards the moment that the fleet would be able to dive back into the warp.

‘*You are a fool,*’ growled Argonis. ‘*Whatever these creatures are, they are not my Legion.*’

‘You are so certain?’

‘*What are they trying to do?*’ asked Argonis, as though not hearing Volk.

Volk was about to reply when the sphere of space beyond the canopy flexed and distorted.

‘*Look at the stars,*’ called Argonis.

Volk looked.

The stars had gone. The coiled gas clouds had swallowed the dark. Ember-red luminescence pulsed in the murk. And there was no longer merely the ring of rust-crusted warships and the burning swarm of ordnance. There were shadows in the depths. Vast and great shadows. Shadows that moved like the silhouettes of sea creatures rising from the point in deep water where no light reaches.

The *Iron Blood* began to fire its main guns. New suns burst through the murk. Macro shells struck the void shields of enemy ships. Energies flared, splashing into the dark as multiple shield layers collapsed in a stuttering flash. The rest of the Iron Warriors fleet opened up. Three bloated ships died: torn apart, battered with fire, scattered in flames.

But the dark beyond the flames was not black space. It was a skin. A transparent skin over a black eye looking in. The swarm of oncoming torpedoes surged on through the wall of explosions, burning like a swarm of insects flying through candle flames.

Volk felt heat crawling over his flesh. He was sweating. He could feel the droplets squeezing from his skin. His vision was blurring.

‘*You are too weak…*’ breathed a voice in his skull that might have been a memory, or might have been his own. ‘*Iron Warriors die with the iron in their veins running rust. They die without bullets in their guns. They die as*

they always did and always will. Like the weak and unwanted children of war.'

But what is the choice? answered a voice in his thoughts, quiet and measured in amongst the storm. *We have no choice and never have. We are the tools of others' conquest. Broken and cast aside when used. We have nothing else we can be.*

'There is always something else,' answered the voice in his skull. *'You just need to let yourself become it.'*

'*Brother!*' The shouted warning pulled the world back around him. Red lights burned through the cockpit. Impacts shivered through the fuselage. Something hit the canopy. Cracks spider-webbed out from the impact. He was flying into a tumbling wall of debris. His finger was on the firing stud of his lascannons, draining their charge. He could feel the heat of destruction, in his nerves, in his soul.

He realised that he could not stop, that he had been flying directly into the oncoming enemy without being conscious of it. He had been killing. The debris hitting him was the remains of his victims.

The chrono at the edge of his sight was draining down to the time when the *Iron Blood* would be ready to translate into the warp. He should be flipping 786-1-1 over and burning hard to reach the ship. He should be leaving the sphere of battle. He did not, though. He could not. Something else, something that had been curled in the root of his altered flesh was holding him where he was. He did not want to endure. He did not want to bear the trials that others could not. He wanted to be the truth of what he had always been, what he truly was.

'*What are you doing?*' called Argonis.

The nerve connections to 786-1-1 burned. Missiles and cannons were his fingers.

An enemy craft flicked across Volk's vision. He fired. Las-fire reached out from him.

Explosion…

Light… bright behind the fever-smear. He was spinning. Engines roared with the exhalation of his lungs.

Volk could see the rest of the fighter screen turning, engines bright as they burned the last of their fuel and ran back to the embrace of their mother ships. He should be with them. He had enough fuel to make it. Enough time.

A voice…
‘*Break off,*’ roared Argonis in his ear. ‘*Break off now!*’

NINE

Maloghurst

Silence closed over him like a hand. The red-edged clouds had become featureless black, the sound of the wind an echoing stillness. He breathed and heard the sound fill his ears. He took a step. Cold damp stone met his foot. His armour was gone. He felt rough cloth scratch his skin as he moved. A staff was in his hand, ready to take his weight as he took another step. Pain ran across his back, and he winced as he moved.

None of this is real, said a voice in his head, and then another voice answered. *Whatever makes you say that? Just because it does not follow the same rules that does not mean it isn't happening.*

There was no sign of Horus, though. Just the dark and the sound of his own breathing. The sensation was different though. He had just two lungs and one heart.

Mortal again, if only for a while.

'Sire,' he called. 'Horus…'

Echoes answered, rolling out and back into a space in front of him. A cave then, or chamber. He took a step, feeling the damp on the water-smoothed stone and steadying himself on the staff. Horus would be here. He had to be…

Does he? came a thought.

He blinked. There was light in the distance, small and cold but light. He moved towards it, slipping and nearly falling on the uneven floor. The light grew. It was not flame or the glare of a stab-beam or lumen. It was a slow-spreading glow that crept along the wet stone. Maloghurst kept his eyes on it as he worked his way across the cave floor until he could see its source. He stopped.

A black pool of water crossed the cave floor, running from wall to wall. The water was so black that he would have thought it an opening into an

abyss, were it not for the moon shining from its surface. As he watched, a drop of moisture fell from the roof and scattered ripples over its face. He looked up. The ceiling of the cave was crystal-threaded stone without crack or opening. The pool was narrow, but barred the way to the opposite side, with no path around the edge. He moved to the bank and bent to test the water with his fingers.

'Are you sure you want to do that?'

Maloghurst jerked up, stepping back from the pool, staff in both hands and ready to strike.

A figure stood on the other side. It was a man. Loose skin hung over withered muscle, and the hair that hung to his shoulders was white in the reflected moonlight. His back was straight though, and the time that creased his face had only etched his sharp, avian features sharper. For a second Maloghurst did not recognise the face, shorn of the genhancements it had worn in life. Then recognition pulled a name from his mouth.

'Iacton?'

Iacton Qruze shrugged.

'If you like,' he said. Maloghurst noticed the figure's clothes then. A long tunic of grey-white hung from Qruze's shoulders. Blood stained the fabric. Maloghurst could see the sharp spatters from blade cuts and the dark blooms from deep wounds. A torn leaf of parchment sat on his chest, pinned in place by the broken-off tips of knives. A single word had been written on the parchment in a slashing, spattered hand. 'Murder', it read.

'A warp spirit,' growled Maloghurst, 'a conjuring of daemons wearing the skin of a memory.'

'If you prefer,' said Iacton Qruze again. His eyes were empty holes, his gaze the blank stare of ancient statues.

All of the lore that Maloghurst had learnt and mastered on conversing with creatures of the immaterium clicked through his mind. He was seeking Horus, to pull his master back into the world of the living. He was walking the paths of the warp now, of dreams and metaphors, and the warp was twisting the task into something older and more deadly. He had to be cautious.

'You are searching, Twisted One, searching beyond the bounds of your strength and ability.'

Qruze stepped forwards and bent down next to the moon-silvered pool. He extended a hand and slowly touched the water with his fingers. ***'But you***

can still have answers if you wish.'

'What is the price?' said Maloghurst. A suspicion was forming inside his thoughts, but he kept it unformed, the idea hidden in fragments. The subtleties required to lie to men were nothing compared to the deception of daemons.

'The price?' said Qruze. ***'You should know that, brother. For where do we stand and what is this water before us?'***

'Cthonia,' he said, putting a name to the idea that had come to him as soon as he saw the cave walls and the black pool. He looked at the disc of the moon hung beneath the rippling surface. He thought of the Mournival and of the splinters of old customs that had been embedded deep in the Legion for so long that only now did their roots in darkness seem obvious. 'The door of becoming,' he said, then flicked his eyes up to Qruze's empty stare. 'The toll-taker, and…' He reached up to his chest, and his fingers found the leather pouch that hung around his neck on a thong. He pulled it free and shook the contents into his palm. The single, shining mirror coin gleamed like an echo of the water-drowned moon. 'The price.'

'Are you the one I called?' asked Maloghurst, lifting up a hand to show the silver engraved coin held between his finger and thumb. It was an old piece of lore from the deep tunnels of Cthonia, given new power by the craft that Maloghurst had learned. The crossing coin, a gift paid to bind a guide to take you through the unknown. Blood and the engravings on it gave the coin a presence here in the warp that was stronger than in reality.

Qruze did not move.

'You understand,' he said, the words a statement rather than a question.

Maloghurst looked at the wolf's head on the silver disc. He tilted his hand and it became an eye, the pupil a slit. 'My soul,' he said. 'All that I was and am and have fought to keep from the warp, while others give themselves to it.'

'That is the price,' said Qruze and held out his hand across the water. ***'That is always the price.'***

Maloghurst nodded, closing his fist briefly over the coin, then opening it again. The silver was bright on his fingers.

'Yes,' he said. 'Of course it is. I understand.'

He tossed the coin into the air. It tumbled, eye and wolf winking as it fell, struck the face of the moon and shattered it. Qruze darted forwards, hand

plunging beneath the water to catch the coin as it sank. Maloghurst's hand clamped around Qruze's closed fist.

'I understand,' snarled Maloghurst. Qruze tried to pull back, but Maloghurst held firm. A syllable of power came from his lips. The cave walls trembled. The water of the pool churned and boiled. Qruze, or the thing that held that shape, was shaking. Boils formed and burst on its skin. 'I understand,' he said again and spat a string of syllables into Qruze's face. 'Layak placed you here, knowing where the path would lead. This is how you snare me. How you get to sink your teeth into my soul. How you get to place another slave by Horus' side.'

The face of Iacton Qruze was distorting, the image of flesh bubbling and melting. His jaw cracked and elongated. Black fangs grew. Fur and feathers burst through split skin. Its body swelled, muscle expanding beneath grey flesh. The daemon roared in his face. Spittle and blood spattered his cheeks.

'You are fallen,' roared the daemon. ***'You are already fallen. You are already meat on our table. You have no choice. The only question is who holds your leash.'***

'You have no power over me. I gave my soul long ago…'

Maloghurst tightened his grasp around the creature's hand, the hand that still held the coin, the coin that was the mirror of the real coin that hung around his slit throat in the real world, the coin that was burning into the daemon's essence even as it tried to let go.

'I gave my soul to Horus Lupercal,' he said and spoke the final syllable. The daemon screamed. The coin was sinking into its flesh, burning and charring skin and bone. Maloghurst released his grip and stood.

The daemon twisted beside the pool, then went still. Its jaw shrank. Skin closed over quills and fur. When it stood up, it looked as it had before. Its right hand alone remained blackened and twisted, the skin shrivelled over the claws of fingers. The silver coin sat in the palm, fused with the blackened flesh. The daemon seemed to breathe for a second, and then looked at Maloghurst.

'You will pay for this.'

'What is your name?'

The daemon shook its head.

'You have bound me. What need have you of my name?'

Maloghurst smiled thinly.

'That I know what to call you. Give me your name.'

‘Amarok,’ said the daemon.

‘And you will be my guide, Amarok, just as you promised but never intended.’ Maloghurst indicated the pool. ‘Lead me to Horus.’

‘You have no idea what you are asking.’

‘I do not care.’

‘Very well,’ said Amarok and bent to breathe on the water. The moon vanished, and now there was just darkness, its surface no longer holding any reflections. The daemon stepped back and indicated the pool.

Maloghurst moved to the edge and then looked up at the daemon. Black spaces looked back at him.

‘Why did you wear this shape?’ he asked. ‘Of all the faces you could have taken, that old fool is one that means very little to me.’ He gestured at the parchment still pinned to its chest. ‘And his death even less.’

‘We are all old men, Mal,’ said Iacton Qruze’s voice. Amarok smiled and gestured at the pool. ***‘After you, my master.’***

Layak

‘This place is an abomination!’ snarled Layak. The paths before him branched and curled away like the insides of a conch shell. They had stopped running a length of time ago that he was not certain he could judge. They had moved through spaces that he was certain were larger, vast and echoing places that pressed down on his senses even through the concealing mists. Gravity obeyed a simple perverse law: down was whatever surface you were standing on.

‘Or it could be seen as a marvel,’ said Actaea. She still had the crystal bulb of blood in her hands. Every now and then she would lift it to one of her eyes and press it to the socket. ‘The webway deceives, but is not deception sacred? Do not the righteous need to be tested?’

‘It defies us,’ he snapped.

‘And anything that defies should be torn down? Is that not rather short-sighted?’

‘Your questions are–’

‘Perceptive,’ said Actaea. ‘I would have hoped that one who has amassed so much power under the sight of the gods would value perception.’

‘I value only what serves the gods.’

‘You lie,’ she said and shrugged. She was moving her head from side to side, her face occasionally twitching. ‘Not that way,’ she said, pointing

down one of the passages but not moving to take the other branch.

‘I do not lie.’

‘You lie all the time. Your essence begins with lies, and any truth you find is a rarity. You lie. So does everyone. So does Lorgar, but more to himself than anyone else.’

Layak went very still.

She looked around at him and shrugged.

‘I speak as I see,’ she said. ‘That is what my duty is.’

‘Duty to whom?’

‘The truth,’ she said. ‘Ultimately that is what we serve, isn’t it? Not primarchs or emperors or warmasters, but the truth of the universe.’

‘The gods–’ he began.

‘You call them gods and the title serves, but they are just an expression of truth. It does not matter if we kneel to it, if we offer prayers, or if we loathe it and despise it, the truth is eternal and claims all.’

‘You are a heretic!’

Kulnar and Hebek had put their hands on the hilts of their swords.

‘No,’ said Actaea, unmoving. The blade slaves paused in their movement. ‘I am the part of your soul that is missing, Hollow One. The part that wonders why Lorgar despises you yet keeps you close, that wonders why you have no real name but chose one from a book – why you are a slave who does not even know what master holds his chain.’ Actaea shook her head. ‘What?’ she said. ‘Do you think that you should kill me?’

‘I have done more for less cause,’ said Layak.

‘Yes, at least that is not a lie. You cannot kill me. You are already lost, and you need me just to survive in here. And you should not think that this truth-speaking is a weakness – it is a necessity. The webway is not a labyrinth of tunnels, it is a labyrinth of the mind. It listens, it breathes in the secrets from those that walk its roads. The same path walked by different souls will lead to different places. Maps here do not mark branches and turns. They mark the shape of the soul that would reach its destination.’ She grinned. He noticed that her teeth were polished points of silver. ‘Why do you think that you and your brothers became lost? You are hiding things from yourselves. All of you.’

‘There are spirits in here,’ said Layak, shaking his head, ‘powerful and unbindable.’

‘Those that have been lost to the roads,’ said Actaea, ‘souls who will never leave.’

‘More ghosts,’ growled Layak.

‘This is a realm of ghosts, Hollow One. You should feel at home.’

Layak was about to snarl a reply when a sound breathed across his senses.

He raised a hand.

‘Do you hear that?’ said Layak. Kulnar twitched beside him. Hebek hissed something that might have been a word if the mouth speaking it had had a tongue. Actaea froze. Her face creasing into a frown.

‘I hear nothing,’ she said.

Sound in the webway was flat. The clink of their weapons did not echo, and the buzz of their power armour had no depth. Layak turned slowly, aware of the itching in his nerves where the phantom had slid its hand through his flesh and armour. The sound came again, breathing from the left-hand path in front of them.

‘I heard the clash of swords. Bolter fire…’

‘There have been battles in here since its birth, and creatures fight and die in it still,’ said Actaea. ‘Sometimes you can hear echoes of those clashes from halfway across the galaxy and far into the past.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Layak, ‘but that was neither.’ He began to run down the left passage. The existence of the right-hand passage folded out of being. ‘Bring her!’ he called to the blade slaves. Actaea was already following Layak, red robe billowing behind her. Kulnar scooped her up, overtaking her in a single bound. She hissed in anger.

Layak ran. The mist was pulling back, the tunnel hardening and unfolding in front of him like a flower opening to sunlight. He took a step…

And stepped into a place of fire and slaughter.

Volk

‘He is healing at a rate that is inconsistent with the standard properties of his physiology.’ The voice was a drone of static and turning cogs. He breathed, tasted iron. ‘I was unable to remove portions of the damaged armour.’

Another voice, too distant to hear clearly but familiar in tone.

‘No closer to rapid regeneration and sinew-fusion, although there has been an alteration to the metallic structure of the–’

The voice that interrupted remained just out of hearing.

He could not see, but flashes of orange light bubbled in the darkness.

Flashes…

Darkness…

There had been the light of fire, bright splashes in the black, stitches of bullets and las-blasts in golden and silver thread. He had been riding into the teeth of the enemy, and the heat of his machine around him had been like the red roar of blood. The displays had been red, the pulsing red of warning, of damage, of fire…

He had…

‘What… happened?’ he asked, and his voice was a gurgle and gasp of fluid and cartilage.

‘You disobeyed orders,’ said Argonis, his voice now close and clear. ‘You took leave of sense. You came as close to dying as I have seen someone who is still alive.’

‘I… cannot see…’

‘The remaining biological ocular sphere was lost with the right upper portion of your skull. The augmetic in the left portion is still functional though deactivated. I can reactivate it at your command.’

‘Do so,’ said Volk. There were things clicking in his chest like the rise and fall of levers.

His world filled with static. Pain lanced into his skull and exploded in a shriek of migraine-bright light.

He did not cry out. The taste of iron was thick in his mouth.

Ghosts of green-and-blue light blurred into being in front of him. He was suspended upright, the central node of a web of chains, tubes and wires. The web twitched in time with a rhythmic suck and hiss that crept into his ears. Below and in front of him stood a tech-priest. A mass of metallic tentacles flexed in place of its legs as it came closer. Discs of eye-lenses rotated beneath its cowl.

‘Perception achieved,’ it droned in its voice of static and cogs.

‘What happened out there?’ asked Argonis, stepping closer behind the tech-priest. He was still armoured, and his eyes were hard in his unscarred face. Volk saw the flicker and bloom of armour bursting under the deluge of fire, and then the momentary flower of rupturing fuel cells, fire swallowing the breath of air that fed it. And he felt the heat again, and tasted it against his teeth. It tasted of iron.

‘I… do not know,’ he said. Argonis looked at him for a long moment.

‘They had to cut you from your craft… What little there was left to cut out.’ He paused. ‘I have seen kill-frenzies before, seen a human pilot fly through a war cloud of fighters, clawing them from the air until his cells were dry and there was nothing more than air in his lungs to scream in rage before he died.’ He moved closer, looking up, and Volk saw that there was something that might have been pity in his eyes. ‘But you are the Iron Talon, not a mortal strung out on stimms and combat hours until you can’t see what is real. So what happened?’

Iron within. Iron without. The litany circled him, and in it he heard an answer. Iron has one desire, it said. It dreams of whetstone and rasp. It lives to be a killing edge.

Volk tried to shake his head but could not. The tech-priest skittered closer, adjusting something out of sight. Volk’s head lolled and then rotated.

‘Where are we?’ he asked.

Argonis glanced at the tech-priest, then back at Volk.

‘Sarum,’ said Argonis. The tech-priest flinched, looking at Volk and hissing steam. Argonis did not respond. ‘You have slept long, brother.’

‘And you wake me now?’

‘No,’ said Argonis. ‘You woke as soon as we dropped from the warp at the system edge and came within range of its outer defences.’

Volk felt the words buzz through his mind. Argonis had placed a weight on them, as though waiting to see how Volk responded.

‘How did you know when I woke?’ Volk asked.

Argonis gave the slightest shrug, the smallest shadow of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

‘I was here,’ was all he said.

Volk would have blinked, but his eye was a machine, and he realised that he could not feel his face.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘We survived,’ said Argonis.

‘Show me,’ said Volk.

Argonis hesitated and then nodded, glancing at the tech-priest.

Images and data filled his sight. He saw. He saw the bloated ships explode and burn as they closed on the *Iron Blood* and its sisters. He saw the rest keep coming, vomiting ordnance at the Iron Warriors until it seemed that they swarmed the stars. He saw the iron-hulled ships grid the

darkness with fire, each volley coordinated, measured so that the spinning diamond of ships seemed one entity obeying a single will. The enemy kept pressing, heedless, until the first breaches into the warp opened and the Iron Warriors drove back to the storm. The sensor data blinked to black.

‘What did they want?’ asked Volk as the image of Argonis returned. ‘The creatures that claimed to be your Legion brothers–’

‘They were not of the Legion.’

‘Whatever they were, they must have known that they could not face our guns and prevail. What did they hope to achieve?’

Argonis looked at Volk for a long moment.

‘I do not know,’ he said. ‘When the fleet returned to the warp, the storms had dissipated. Blown clear as though making way for us.’

‘The warp… Your broth– The one who claimed to be your brother claimed to speak with the voice of the warp.’

‘The Warmaster has harnessed the warp – it answers to him. No other speaks with its voice.’

‘After all I have seen of the warp’s hand in this war, I wish that I could hear that and believe it.’

Argonis looked as though he was going to reply but then gave a shake of his head and looked away.

‘Perturabo goes to meet the Red Priests of Sarum at the gates of their realm. I must go to be there.’

‘Does the primarch summon me?’ he asked, and then realised that it was a strange question.

Argonis shook his head. Again the tech-priest flinched and muttered a clatter of sound.

‘If you are going with him,’ said Volk, noticing that strength was replacing static fog in his nerves, ‘then I go with you. Get me down from here. Get me armoured.’

‘That request falls outside of my current advised parameter,’ began the tech-priest, lens plates spinning several times. ‘Augmetic integration is not complete. Mind interface linkages have not taken. The machine does not bless your animation.’

Volk laughed. The tech-priest slithered backwards. Machines murmured out of sight.

Argonis stepped forwards.

‘You should see,’ said Argonis softly and gestured at the hissing tech-priest. ‘Show him.’

The tech-priest hesitated and then began to turn dials on a brass-cased box he took from beneath his robe. The image filling Volk’s sight vanished, so that now he was looking at a cable-wrapped lump hanging in a web of chains. It held the shape of a torso, but only just. Its limbs were gone below the elbow and knee joints. The metal of pistons and connection sockets gleamed amongst the flesh. Servo-arms moved around it like caressing hands, spraying a mist of counterseptic from tiny nozzles. Pieces of blackened metal clung to the flesh in places, fused by bulbous, pink scar tissue. The head was a lump of iron held on a cog ratchet neck. There was a cooked, wet look to the meat of its body, and a film of iridescent corrosion covered the exposed plasteel and chrome. It did not look like a Space Marine. It did not look like him.

‘Fit the augmetics,’ he heard his voice say. ‘Bring me armour. Make me walk from here.’

The tech-priest looked at Argonis again.

‘The lord primarch did not–’

‘Do it,’ said Argonis. ‘Under the authority of the Warmaster, do as he asks.’

The tech-priest complied.

They took his sight away while they worked. There was pain. He endured it.

He walked from the arming chamber with a hiss and snap of pistons. They had not been able to fit him into a standard suit of armour, so they had desecrated a suit of Tactical Dreadnought plate. It had been Tartaros-pattern, once, but modifications had had to be made to accommodate his flesh. He had begun to heal. They had told him that they had not been able to remove some of the augmetics that they had fitted first; his flesh had not allowed it.

His first steps had juddered agony through him, but by the time he reached the launch bays, while he still felt pain, the feeling had a different meaning to him. He no longer cared that it hurt. They had given him weapons, a bolter and a chainsword. Neither felt as they should in his grip. He had supposed that was to be expected; his hands no longer had flesh to feel. Another whispered thought, which lurked behind the pain of iron and

flesh, said that it was because the weapons had never taken life. They were dead, unbloodied, without a song to sing.

Perturabo looked at him as he crossed the deck. Ranks of Iron Warriors waited in front of the open ramps of gunships. Volk slowed as he drew near his primarch. The Iron Circle's targeting eyes washed over him and did not snap away for several seconds. Argonis walked at his side, armed and armoured, the Eye of Horus held in his right hand. Volk began to kneel, pistons hissing, as he waited for the censure to come from his lord's lips. The primarch gave a single shake of his head before Volk could lower his body.

The Iron Circle parted as Volk approached, and closed behind him and Argonis as they followed the primarch into the belly of a Stormbird. Only when the gunship was roaring and shivering through the void did Volk break the silence.

'They did not dispute your right to come here, my lord?'

'No,' said Perturabo, looking away to gaze into the dark. 'They were waiting for us.'

Volk heard the words and felt a shiver pass through his piston- and metal-sheathed flesh.

TEN

Maloghurst

He fell through a burning sky. Clouds of fire billowed from horizon to horizon. The ground beneath was broken stone and black, baked earth. There was no sun, just the light of an inferno, gleaming and flowing over shattered fortresses and the bones of war machines. Huge, serpentine shapes coiled through the fire clouds. Lightning struck from earth to sky and then back, a forest of thunderbolts bleaching the scene to monochrome for the blink of an eye. Maloghurst fell and felt the burning wind sting his skin. His robes were whipping behind him. The daemon that wore the shape of Iacton Qruze was just in front of him, close enough to touch. He was not tumbling, he realised; gravity was not pulling him, and he had a feeling that here its touch was no more real than the skin of his own body.

An explosion blossomed far beneath him, the shock wave a kilometre-wide bubble, the mushroom cloud growing up from the burning ground. The roar of the detonation reached up and the fiery clouds echoed it with thunder.

'Do you hear that?' called the daemon. ***'That is the voice of a god.'***

A glistening, black sea rushed forwards in the wake of the explosion, flowing over and together, clashing in a red foam. But it was no sea. It was a tide of bodies, millions of creatures, some running on two legs, some bounding like beasts, their armour scorched black but their blood running red as it spilled. As he fell lower, he could see machines striding through the press and churning amongst the slaughter, crushing the dead and the living, their guns firing.

He recognised the lines of some – Reaver Titans and Baneblade tanks – but others were of designs he had never seen or heard of, vehicles from wars long past or yet to be. He saw a machine shaped like a cut gem pulse, and a wave of cold light shred the armour and flesh from those nearby. He

saw a thing with three spindle legs brought down by a blow from an alien creature of chitin and flesh. There were warriors in furs amongst the slaughter, stabbing with rock-tipped spears, slender figures that spun like bladed dreams, humans in blood- and mud-caked uniforms spraying torrents of fire into any that came near. On it went, a slaughter marching to the edge of sight.

'Where is this?' he called.

The daemon twisted its head to look back at him.

'Everywhere,' it said. Then stretched out a hand and pointed. ***'Look.'***

Maloghurst looked. There, on a hill of corpses, stood a figure in black armour. Even from here, with a world of slaughter laid out beneath him, Maloghurst felt his eye drawn to the figure.

'Lupercal,' he breathed. He watched the Warmaster swing his mace around him, smashing and breaking as the tide of warriors surged up the slope towards him and were battered back, broken, torn, blood scattering from crushed skulls. A hand of blades the length of scythes tore the life from those that came close enough to feel its touch. Bloody ghosts screamed around him, rising from the slain in red-threaded mist. Now that he looked, he saw how the tide of warriors, machines and fire circled the lone figure, each whirlpool of slaughter a mote in the greater vortex of death. And Horus was not still, somehow; impossibly he was moving, wading across the ocean of slaughter, blow by blow, step by step.

As he watched, a spider-limbed war machine clambered up over the heaped dead towards Horus. Bright green fire lanced from it, blinding and neon-bright. The beam struck the howling spirits around the Warmaster. White light sheeted out. Figures fell, eyes burned from their skulls. For a second nothing moved, then Horus walked from the strobing core of light.

He was wounded – even at this distance Maloghurst could see that. Blood glossed his bare face, and his armour fumed smoke. But on he came. The spider machine halted, staggered. Mandible guns shone with building power. Horus charged. The machine screamed energy. *Worldbreaker* struck it. Lightning crawled out, freezing the instant in slices of white and black. Metal folded and tore. The machine skittered back, kicking chunks of corpse-meat into the air. Horus' second blow struck down, hammering its chrome torso into the ground. The Warmaster waded forwards to meet the tide of battle as it faltered, and more were falling and his talon was screaming as it pulled the souls of the dead from their flesh.

‘You see,’ said the daemon. Maloghurst looked at it, realising suddenly that they were no longer falling but hanging in the heat-tortured air. ***‘You see how he is honoured. For others the Lord of Carnage would send an army. But for him the Brazen One makes a realm of slaughter spanning all time. Just for him.’***

Maloghurst knew now what he was looking at. In writings that had been shunned even during Old Night, he had read the fever-dream impressions of souls who said that they had seen places where battle flowed across lands that never slept, where the ground fumed with the pyre smoke of the fallen, and the dead rose with the rising of red suns to begin the eternal slaughter anew.

‘Take me to him,’ he snarled at Amarok. The daemon bowed its head, and they descended through the ember-laden wind. Maloghurst could feel the heat of fire and explosions, but it was faint, as though it were just a shadow of true flame and a memory of pain. No bullets rose from the sea of war to great them, and when they touched the ground the tide of battle flowed around them. It did not part, Maloghurst noticed, but somehow the wild movement of machines and bodies never touched them.

Horus loomed above them, his every movement killing. The corona of souls whirled around him, streaked red with the blood of their deaths. Maloghurst could feel the presence of the primarch. It was the same pull he had felt in the throne room, as though he were caught on the edge of a typhoon.

‘Sire!’ he shouted and drew breath to shout again, but Horus looked at him. His face was blood-streaked. There were wounds in his armour, Maloghurst saw, and blood in his mouth as he spoke.

‘Maloghurst,’ he said, the movement of his slaughter continuing without pause. ‘You should not be here. I left you…’ He heaved the head of *Worldbreaker* through a press of bronze-armoured bodies. ‘I left you on Molech. How have you defied my will?’

‘This is a dream,’ he replied, shouting over the sound of gunfire and the cries of the dying. ‘This is a fugue of the warp. You need to come back to us, sire. You need to follow me back.’

‘I will not fail,’ growled Horus, baring bloody teeth. ‘I will break this realm of gods. I will make it bow to my will. Go back to Molech. Do not defy this command as you defied me by following me here.’

Horus surged forwards, not looking back at Maloghurst as he struck another blow, and blood showered up with shattered splinters of bone.

‘Molech was long ago, sire,’ called Maloghurst. ‘You returned to us. You came back from the realm beyond the door.’

‘No, he did not,’ said Amarok. The daemon’s voice was quiet, but Maloghurst heard it clear through the din of battle. He turned to look at it. The thing with the face of Iacton Qruze shook its head almost sorrowfully. ***‘He did not return, at least not whole.’***

‘What lies do–’

‘No lies, Twisted One. Just cold truths. Truths that should have been obvious to you all.’

‘You are–’

‘I am bound by you,’ it said. ***‘Command me to speak the truth and you will hear the same words, Maloghurst. Horus remained here, in the Land of Slaughter, and if we looked we would see him walking beneath the Orchards of Decay and maybe even catch sight of his reflection as he seeks a way out of the Castle of Mirrors.***

‘He is the anointed of the gods. He won and claimed the favour of each of them, greater and lesser, from highest power to lowest prince of despair. They poured knowledge and power into him, more than any other champion has received, for such a vessel they have never had before. They raised him up, and they gave him knowledge, insight, power, strength. They whispered that he was all and more than his father was. And he accepted the lie.’

‘It was no lie,’ said Maloghurst. ‘He will cast his father down.’

‘That is not the lie, Twisted One. You should know the taste of falsity. He returned to you but part of him, part of his soul, part of his strength, remains here, forever bound to the gods.’

‘He is not here. I am not here. This is a metaphor, a way of seeing something that is happening between him and the warp…’

‘If you like, but it is still real. As is his struggle.’

‘He said he was fighting.’

‘And so he is, fighting the gods that he believed he could make cower.’

‘There is something else, is there not? If he is fighting the gods within his soul, then they are trying to consume him.’

A smile flicked over the daemon’s lips.

‘Power is a game, a great game without dimension or limit. When the plague winds wax, the fire of war comes and burns the festering corpses from the fields. When excess reaches perfection, wild chance comes to spoil it. On and on in an endless dance.’

‘He has seen and given pact to all the powers,’ said Maloghurst, but in his thoughts he could see the implications of the daemon’s words, even while he snarled at it. ‘He is no pawn in their game.’

‘But he is. Not a pawn but still a piece to be played with. That is the truth of all power, is it not?’

‘But the warp powers chose the Warmaster as their ally against the Emperor.’

‘As their tool, not their ally. The lie, remember. For once, all of the powers of the other realm put that goal above the struggle to gain ascendency over each other. Can you understand what a rare event that is? Chaos, some of you name us in your mortal tongue. There is truth in that name. And Chaos abhors unity and balance. It thirsts for discord, for battle, for slyness and dissolution. No matter what brings us together, the forces that pull us apart are stronger.’

‘They each want him for themselves,’ said Maloghurst. ‘They know that victory is close and do not want to share the spoils.’ He looked at the bloody figure of Horus wading across the eternal battlefield. ‘They are tearing him apart…’

‘Like children with a toy.’ The daemon looked in the direction of Horus. He was still moving forwards but slowing now. Dog-like creatures with six legs and flayed skulls were climbing over each other to bite at him, teeth raising sparks from his armour, their howls shrill above the gunfire.

‘And as in heaven, so on Earth. They are pulling him apart, just as they are pulling you and your allies apart in the realm of flesh.’ Maloghurst looked at the daemon, his eyes narrowing. ***‘You have seen it,’*** said the daemon, ***‘all the factions and lies, and changes festering in the dark. The gods use many instruments, some knowing, others ignorant, but all serve whether they know what they do or not. Battles fought for pride, festering ambition, desires realised in darkness, all tip the balance one way or another. And all the while, Horus is getting weaker.’***

‘You are saying–’

‘The wolves circle, Twisted One. Horus is fighting, but he is losing.’

‘Then Chaos will have nothing.’

‘Won’t it?’ said the daemon. Maloghurst stared into its fixed, smiling face. ***‘He has to accept it, Maloghurst. He has to surrender to be victorious. It is the only way. He has to take the last step. Otherwise they will rip him apart as he struggles, and put another in his place.’***

‘There is no other,’ said Maloghurst. ‘There could be no other.’

‘Yes, there could. If you want to save him, you have to make him see that he must submit.’

‘You lie,’ he breathed.

‘No,’ said Amarok. ***‘No, I tell you the truth you don’t want to hear.’***

‘He will not fail,’ Maloghurst spat, and started after the image of Horus. ‘And I will not fail him.’

The sky blinked to blank red above him. The swirl of warriors and the sound of gunfire and dying was still there, but it seemed to be getting further away. ‘No!’ shouted Maloghurst. The image of Horus was becoming dim, a black swirl of ink in bloody water. ‘No!’ He rounded on the daemon.

‘It seems that the world of flesh calls,’ *it smirked.*

‘You–’

‘Remember what I said, Twisted One,’ it said, its voice Iacton Qruze’s again. ***‘As in heaven, so on Earth. The wolves circle.’*** Amarok raised its right hand as its image began to fade, the silver coin at the centre of the placating palm***. ‘We will speak again. After all – I am with you now and forever, brother.’***

And then it was gone, and pulsing screams were surrounding Maloghurst as pain peeled away his body and gave him another one in its place.

Air gasped into his lungs. He felt himself choke. Pain shivered through him. The deck was under his bare hands. Frozen blood fell from him. The air was screaming.

‘Get up!’ shouted a voice nearby. ‘Get up, you shrivelled old bastard, or I will cut your throat again.’

His chest heaved, and he vomited crystallised blood and bile. He touched his neck and found soft flesh where the athame had opened his throat. He pushed up to his feet and staggered.

‘You have to get out of here now,’ said Kalus Ekaddon. Behind him Sota-Nul was already at the access hatch. ‘The Mournival commanders have called you to the strategium.’

Maloghurst blinked. His sight was swimming, the screaming still filling his ears… No, not screaming: alarms. Battle alarms.

‘Why?’ he gasped. ‘What is happening?’

‘The enemy,’ snarled Ekaddon. ‘The Emperor’s dogs have found us.’

Layak

The space was a smooth-sided cavern, like the inside of a vast seashell. Bridges of a glossy substance criss-crossed it like the strands of a web. Polished crystals were set in a curved arch at each point where two of the slender bridges met. As tall as a mortal man, the crystals glowed with a pale light. Lightning crackled between them. Where a bridge met the wall of the webway, a curved hole opened into the mist-shrouded beyond. Layak realised that he had run out of one such opening. A narrow bridge projected away from him.

Gunfire stitched between the delicate bridges. Red warriors were running forwards, beams of energy and streams of shells flickering from their guns at unseen targets. Layak’s vox shrieked, and then his ears were filled with a clicking rasp like the rubbing of insects’ wings. He knew the sound; it was the voice of the Unspeaking. Without tongues they could not speak, but in battle they controlled the crack and hiss of the vox to create a language that billowed like the roar of a dust storm.

‘Remain,’ he called to the blade slaves. ‘Protect the oracle.’

He ran to the middle of a tapered bridge.

‘*Xithras’ka’hemek*,’ he breathed. The silver teeth of his mask champed open and closed as the unholy word ripped past them. The sound took shape. Smoke-black sigils tumbled in Layak’s wake, tumbling, dissolving and reforming. The shapes of feathers and curved claws shivered into ethereal existence. High, hungry cries cracked the air. Layak’s will flowed across the bond to the daemons, and they wheeled high above him as a shadowborn murder of crows. His sight filled with the multifaceted vision of the daemons. Red smeared the view. His mind absorbed the vision, melding it with that of his true eyes.

He saw the enemies that his brothers were firing at then. They burned white in the daemons’ sight. Plumes whipped behind their tall helms as they spun bladed pole arms. They were golden beings, lightning threading their essence, as though their bodies were sculpted from thunderbolts.

Custodians, thought Layak, *the Emperor’s companions and soulbound warriors*.

And before a group of the Custodians stood Lorgar. Power haloed him, shimmering, folding light to shadow as blows struck at him, coiling bolts of energy to cords of fire. The red of his armour seemed black amidst the blaze. His bladed sceptre was in his hand, its head screaming as it struck. As Layak watched, a Custodian stepped back as the sceptre swept past him, then spun and lunged with his spear. The blow sang with killing grace. It never landed. The hurricane of power around Lorgar struck the Custodian. For an instant the arcane craft worked into the warrior's armour flared. Then the Custodian was torn apart. Armour became slag, flesh ash, bones black splinters that scattered in the gale. Lorgar had not even broken stride.

To many he was a priest, a demagogue who could inspire mortals to deeds that breached the veil of heaven. Layak had seen it done, had seen his primarch cow a conquered city to silence and then raise its voices in praise of the gods. But in that moment, Layak saw that Lorgar was no priest; he was the killing force of faith given form.

A squad of red-armoured Word Bearers moved after their lord. Silent screams of exultation rattled from their tongueless mouths. Two Custodians stood on the bridge before them and their primarch. They did not flee, though they must have known they would die. Layak supposed that some would have found that defiance worthy of honour, but for him it deserved only contempt. There was no bravery in them embracing martyrdom; their souls had been mutilated, stealing the decision of self-sacrifice from them.

They fought well though, moving back, spears spinning in unreadable patterns, firing bolts from their weapons even as they whirled.

Lorgar lashed his sceptre into a Custodian. The golden warrior moved faster than the eye could track, but the spiked head crashed home. Crushed gold and charred flesh scattered from the sceptre as it pulled free of the ruin it had wrought.

Gunfire lashed down. Explosive rounds hammered into the Word Bearers nearest Lorgar. Chewed armour and blood fell from the bridge. Fire and detonations churned the air around the primarch.

A trio of automata had stomped into sight on a bridge above the Custodians and the primarch. Their armour was the red of setting suns, and the marks of the Martian Mechanicum spidered over their armour plates in lines of binaric. They seemed to be suspended from the bridge, hanging by their feet, aiming above their heads with piston-braced batteries of

weapons. Except, of course, they were not upside down from their point of view.

Layak yanked the flock of daemons into the air between the automata and their targets. Targeting beams flicked towards them, weapons rotated. The winged daemons shrieked and tried to twist aside. Layak's will lashed out, holding them together as they flew into the torrent of gunfire. Bodies of clammy skin and black feathers tore apart. Layak felt the daemons dissolve into nothing and heard their curses as they tumbled back into the depths of the warp. They lasted seven seconds.

But it was enough.

Lorgar stepped through the burning air. His eyes had become windows into a realm of fire. He raised a hand. The gesture was slow, the fingers open as though in a blessing. The closest automaton flashed white with heat. Rounds and fuel ignited. Pistons melted. It sagged forwards, like a wax doll in the flame of a cutting torch.

Layak was in the middle of a bridge directly beneath the primarch now. Fire blazed from above him and to his right, punching into the Word Bearers trying to reach their primarch's side. Layak twisted as another pair of automata walked into place on one of the other bridges. One of the machines' targeting beams found him. Its weapons rotated. Recoil compensators locked into place with a hiss of pistons.

'*Khii'na'uk*,' Layak spoke. The word vomited into being, burning towards the automaton as it fired. Heavy rounds met rotting flesh as the daemon bloated into reality. Seven wings unfolded from its abdomen. Multifaceted eyes glinted in clusters above a dangling proboscis. Metre-long insect legs dangled from its thorax. Larvae and pus scattered from it as it flew at the automata. Gunfire ripped into it, and rotting fat and bloody meat showered out. The automata unlocked their legs and tried to step into a different firing position. The daemon struck the first as it was moving and pitched it backwards. Splinters showered up from the bone-smooth surface of the bridge. The automaton struggled, battle protocols trying to select a course of action. The daemon was smothering it, wrapping its legs around it, drooling acid onto it as its proboscis wormed into its torso. The second automaton was still locking in place to fire when the daemon dragged itself back into the air and flew at it.

Layak turned away, leaving the daemon to its instincts. His eyes found Lorgar. The primarch was at the centre of a storm of smoke and fire. More

Custodians were on the bridge with him, advancing from both ends behind tall shields as fresh squalls of gunfire converged on him from units emerging onto other bridges.

Lorgar paused, the fire of his slaughter rolling back as the air around him shimmered with psychic force. The Word Bearers were at his side now, a circle of silent crimson. The Custodians were advancing, and for an instant Layak saw them out of the corner of his eye.

‘Lord,’ he called.

Lorgar turned. His skin was taut over his skull. Black veins stood out beneath the dusting of gold. His eyes met Layak’s gaze, then moved back to where the blade slaves sheltered Actaea close to the entrance they had emerged from. A beam of vibrating energy struck one of the warriors at Lorgar’s side, and blasted him into a black dust.

‘Lord, this is not–’

The bridge shattered. Pale splinters showered out, pulled in every direction by conflicting gravities. The Custodians fell. Lorgar straightened, eyes closed, his skin sheened with white light. The broken wraithbone halted in mid-air. Threads of fire grew over them, glowing brighter and brighter until they were like coals pulled from the heart of a furnace. Then they were flying out, scything through automata, battle servitors and Custodians, melting armour, kindling fire from oil, cooking flesh to ashes. The wraithbone shattered with each impact, hundreds of smaller shards flying out until the chamber was glowing with what looked like clouds of fire-touched feathers. Shouts and machine cries rose and then became fewer and fewer, until there was just the hiss of wraithbone dust in the wind. Then the cloud became still, a fading blush of heat in the air. Lorgar opened his eyes. The dust fell.

Layak climbed up, following the twists and spirals of the alien bridges. The blade slaves followed him with Actaea between them. He reached Lorgar in time to see the primarch rising from where he had knelt before the broken span. Layak slowed, bending to look at what remained of the corpses that lay on the smooth ground. He reached down with bare fingers to the pulped matter and dust-ground fragments. Black ectoplasm coated his fingertips.

‘These were no creatures of the Emperor,’ he said, and looked up. Lorgar was looking down at him, the mask of serenity in place on the gold-dusted face once again.

‘Once they were,’ said Lorgar.

‘More ghosts,’ said Layak. Above and around them the web of wraithbone shook.

‘It is trying to turn us aside,’ said Actaea. ‘This is a confluence chamber. Time and choices branch from here. We are close. They will return, and stronger.’

‘You are our guide,’ said Lorgar. ‘What is the path we must take?’

She opened her mouth, and then closed it.

‘What path?’ said Lorgar.

Actaea still did not move or speak.

Layak felt his mask twitch on his face. In his mind, fragments of words coiled in his memory. A high, keening noise, like a single cry pulled from one throat after another, shivered through the air.

‘Do you hear that?’ he asked.

Actaea twitched her head.

‘No,’ she said. ‘What do you hear?’

He turned and began to move towards the sound. It was coming from the entrance that Lorgar had emerged from. Light flickered within it, shadows moving over the pale walls as though cast by a growing fire.

‘We came that way–’ began Lorgar.

Gunfire erupted from across the chamber. Silver mist was pouring into the air from out of the walls, rushing towards them like a closing hand.

‘Follow him!’ shouted Actaea, as Layak began to run towards the beckoning scream in his head. Before him, the suddenly black portal looked back.

Volk

The Red Priests waited in a moon made of weapons. Swords, tanks and the shells of Titans lay alongside pistols, live bullets dug from battlefields, axe heads, power field generators, the husks of virus shells, smashed tank turrets and knives of bronze, iron and steel. There too were conversion projectors, segments of macro-cannon barrels, kill-shells still warm with radiation from forgotten wars, bladed chains and lumps of knapped flint. All were jumbled and bonded together in an irregular ball that arced through Sarum’s outer reaches like a rusting morning star swung at the heavens. Perturabo’s gunship had slid into the moon’s heart through the mouth of a nova cannon barrel. The rest of the Iron Warriors fleet, under

Forrix’s command, surrounded the moon, weapons lit, sensors watching but hearing only silence.

A lone servitor greeted the primarch as he disembarked. It was an ancient thing, encased in a patchwork of battle-scarred armour. A helmed skull lolled back on its shoulders, its grin visible through the vertical split in the ancient bronze. It had bowed to them with a clatter of bones and a whir of cogs, and then led them into the dark.

The walls of the tunnels they walked were the same tangle of weapon components, all fused and beaten into a gleaming unity.

Volk did not hear the voices until they were out of sight of the gunship.

At first he thought they were rogue signals on the vox, but they persisted even after he had shut his communication systems down. They did not speak any language he knew, but he thought he almost understood them. The weapons in his hands ached.

‘Hail to Perturabo,’ boomed a voice that echoed from the walls as they stepped into a domed chamber. ‘Hail the Lord of Iron.’ Eight figures stood at the centre of the chamber. Heavy folds of deep red hung from their spindle frames. The robes were edged with white triangles that resembled the blade of a saw. Or teeth. Elongated skulls of black metal sat under the shadow of heavy cowls. Some looked like the flayed heads of horses cast in iron; others were narrow and vulpine. One was not a head at all but a circular mouth set with rings of metallic fangs. Volk could see no weapons, but that did not mean that they were not there. He knew they were. When he looked at the figures it was almost as though he could feel the guns and blades waiting beneath their robes.

‘Your coming here is an honour,’ said the voice again, and Volk wondered which of the eight priests was speaking, or if they all were.

Perturabo looked at the eight as the Iron Circle spread in an arc behind him. Twenty Terminators lumbered into place behind them, cyclone missile racks locking into position as they halted. Argonis stood level with the primarch, Volk a pace behind them both.

‘Honour…’ said Perturabo, letting the word hang in echoes. ‘Not honour enough that you would answer my call to feed the hunger of our guns as we starved for the means to make war.’

The priests were silent. Red light glinted in the holes of their eyes.

‘Sarum stands apart,’ Argonis had said in the days after they had begun their journey to the forge world. ‘They have aided the Warmaster’s allies,

but they keep their own counsel. We should not trust them.'

'I do not think he intends to trust them,' Volk replied, 'only to get from them what he needs.'

Volk knew why they had come here in their search for Angron; of all the forces Sarum had come close to favouring with alliance, it was the World Eaters that enjoyed the closest bond. Angron had subjugated the world, and in the process had resolved a conflict within the priesthood of Sarum. Weaponry and armour had flowed from the forges into the bloody hands of the XII Legion. Since the war within the Imperium had begun, Sarum had seemed to serve the broad interests of the Warmaster but had not come into line with Kelbor-Hal's Mechanicum, nor made any sign of serving anyone but itself. They were not trusted, and stood in their presence Volk could feel why.

'You are welcome, Perturabo,' said the voice of the priests. Then they began to move, the eight figures spreading to the cardinal points of the chamber. 'You must come with us.'

The Iron Circle locked shields with a boom of hydraulics. Weapons armed. Volk felt his weapons twitch in his grasp.

'No,' said Perturabo, with the smallest shake of his head. 'You will give me what I came here for, and then I shall leave.'

'You shall have what you seek, though you have not spoken it,' said the priests. 'You shall receive it and more. But we cannot grant those gifts. You are favoured, Lord of Iron and Death. You will see the heart of all, and it shall speak to you.'

Argonis opened his mouth to speak, but the echoing voice spoke again before he could.

'You who have passed through the Black Star, and sought the weapons of the gods, will find everything that you seek if you follow us.'

Volk felt the words settle into his blood. Cold and heat ran through him. He could feel the impulse in his limbs to move, to follow the promise in the words of the Red Priests. It did not feel like desire. It felt like hunger.

'You know why I am here,' said Perturabo. Until now no mention had been made of information on Angron or the XII Legion.

The priest with an equine skull shook its head. The chain teeth rattled in its jaws.

'We are the keepers,' it said, the voice coming from it alone now. It sounded like cogs chewing meat. 'We only come to convey you beneath.'

‘Beneath?’ asked Argonis.

The iron horse skull turned towards the emissary.

‘Beneath,’ said the priest again.

‘This is honour above all,’ said a priest with the grin of a shark set beneath a red sensor band. ‘Such things are not refused.’

Volk was certain that Perturabo would turn away, but the Lord of Iron gave a small nod.

‘Take us to your revelation,’ he said.

The priest had frozen for a second, but then nodded in turn.

They left the chamber by a door that Volk had not seen when they entered. He was not sure if it was a trick of angle or technology, but until the priests led them towards it he would have sworn that there was no door. The tunnels they walked became rougher and rougher, the wreckage in the walls jutting out across their path so that they had to step around spear blades and the muzzles of field guns. The air grew hotter, as though they were walking towards a blast furnace or the heart of a volcano. He wondered at Perturabo’s words, ‘Take us to your revelation,’ and the shock that had been apparent in the priest’s stillness.

‘There is something at the heart of this realm,’ said Perturabo as he walked in front of Volk. The primarch glanced back briefly, his black gaze touching Volk’s. Then he looked back towards where the escort of priests moved ahead of them. ‘It is a matter of geometry, really. You can see it in the structures of power the priests create, in the words they speak and leave unsaid. These creatures do not serve the Omnissiah of Mars.’

Volk looked at the priests and the white teeth at the edge of their robes, which looked black in the low light. Their eyes were coals.

‘They serve something else,’ said Perturabo, ‘something that they have kept secret. Something that speaks in their dreams of guns and blades.’ Volk thought he heard a smile in his primarch’s voice. Volk felt his pulse freeze. His sight was blurring at the edges. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

‘We are going to meet it, my son. We are going to see our destiny.’

And the priests walking ahead of them turned their heads, necks rotating with a snap of bones and gears. Volk saw red coal eyes and the iron smiles of skulls, and his flesh was burning and the roar of pain was ripping up through his lips, and he was not walking but spinning through the void as his fighter shredded around him.

‘You died,’ said a voice that sounded just like Perturabo. ***‘But you can live again in fire.’***

And Volk screamed his reply.

The passage blinked back into being before him. The priests were walking ahead of them just as they were before. Perturabo strode between the towering bulk of the Iron Circle, his exo-frame purring with each stride. Volk could still feel the heat of his burning flesh melting from him like a fading dream. A faint, orange glow was seeping from the distance ahead. A glance behind showed him only blackness. He felt a shiver pass through his armour and body.

What was happening to him? What was happening to all of them?

‘We have lost vox contact with the *Iron Blood*,’ called Argonis, stopping, his bolter in his hand. Perturabo halted and looked back at the emissary. Beyond him the priests had also paused.

‘The reason that we have lost the link to the fleet,’ said Perturabo, his voice level, ‘is that we are out of range of its vox-transmitters.’

‘The fleet should have coverage into the moon,’ said Argonis. ‘Unless our hosts are jamming it.’

‘Or unless the fleet is now over a billion kilometres away from us,’ said Perturabo. Argonis began to shake his head. ‘We have not walked deeper into the moon. We have passed through a doorway. We are walking to the heart of Sarum itself.’

Volk heard the words and knew they were true. The Red Priests did not respond, though Volk was certain they had heard the primarch. Argonis kept his gaze locked on the tunnel in front of them, his expression fixed.

The glow in the distance was growing. A blush of red heat had started to creep into the walls. Volk could feel it too. Actually feel it. Most of his nerves had been burned out by the damage he had sustained and the swift fitting of his augmetics. Sensation was now a sensor-mediated tingle of data. But he could feel the heat. It spread through the servo-sheathed metal of his limbs and breathed into his skin.

The priests halted in front of them and turned as one to face Perturabo.

‘We do not go further,’ they said, their single voice coming from every direction. ‘You go on alone.’

Perturabo gave a single shake of his head.

‘These come with me.’

‘As you wish,’ they said and moved aside.

Perturabo moved forwards, but Argonis raised his staff of office, the Eye of Horus barring the primarch's path.

'What have you brought us to?' asked Argonis.

'Answers,' said Perturabo, and pushed the staff aside as he walked on. Argonis did not move for a second. Volk looked back at him as he followed the primarch and the Iron Circle. Their eyes met for a long second, metal and crystal to Cthonian black. For a moment Volk thought he saw something in his brother's eye, a ghost of emotion that he could not read. Then the emissary was following them and they were walking into the furnace heat, past the bowed heads of the priests.

The walls were glowing now, cherry-red and coal-black. The jumble of weapons had given way to rough stone shot with seams of crystal and flecks of ore. The dust on the passage floor was soft, grey ash, thick enough to muffle the tread of the Terminators and automata. A low rumbling, like the flow of a great river, was growing as the passage curved before them. Volk felt a sudden urge to turn and go back, but his feet carried him onwards, pistons and meat flowing smoothly as the heat prickled his senses.

And then they stepped around a last curve and into the furnace light of Sarum's heart.

ELEVEN

Maloghurst

‘Fleet systems at full alert,’ said Sota-Nul as they hurried through the dark of the *Vengeful Spirit*’s underworld. Maloghurst was breathing hard. He was sweating blood inside his armour. He thought he could still feel the heat of the burning sky on his face.

‘Why did we come out of the warp?’ he asked as they hurried on. He needed to get to the bridge, he needed to see what was happening. Sota-Nul was siphoning information from the ship’s systems, but it was not the ship or its systems that worried him.

‘As in heaven, so on Earth…’

‘Emergency translation owing to sudden extreme change in etheric conditions,’ said the tech-witch, and coughed a blurt of binaric that might have been an approximation of a mirthless laugh. ‘It threw us back into reality.’

‘And the enemy were just there?’

‘We dropped right on top of an outer system orbital fortress cluster,’ said the tech-witch, her voice sounding all too human as it purred the words. ‘A major one. Five star forts, a beta nine-grade weapons platform network, forty monitor craft and a battle group-sized fleet of warships. I sense the presence of my unenlightened kin and the sons of Rogal Dorn. Do you ever have the sensation that you are being tested/cursed?’

‘You think this amusing?’

‘I think it catastrophic, but not without opportunity.’

‘To lose men and materiel in a pointless fight.’

‘To see if your Legion can kill without the hand of Horus on its shoulder.’

He did not answer. Ten minutes of silence later they reached a primary access hoist. Maloghurst overrode the lockouts and sent the hoist shooting

up to the *Vengeful Spirit*'s aft command cluster. Sota-Nul peeled away as the doors opened, floating above a cluster of lesser tech-devotees as they fell to the floor in obeisance. Maloghurst kept moving, shrugging off the calls of guards and Legion warriors as he strode into the strategium. Shouted orders and the calls of system servitors replaced the blare of battle alarms. Holo-light blinked and spun in the air beneath a domed roof of crystal. The shimmer of reactivating void shields blotted out the light of the stars as he glanced up.

Aximand stood on a stone pillar at the room's centre. A curtain of light surrounded him, changing as his eyes flicked across it. His mouth was set in the stitched mask of his face.

'This is not the time for whatever you are here for,' said Aximand as Maloghurst came to the base of the pillar.

The deck trembled. Maloghurst recognised the sensation of the short-range guns firing.

'Hold launch of all boarding formations,' shouted Aximand. 'Bring everything into formation around us, full weapon overlap.' He glanced at Maloghurst. The skin of Aximand's sutured face was sweating. 'They are already inside firing range. We have no time to calibrate the main guns.'

'So close?' asked Maloghurst.

'We came out of the warp in range of their guns, and they began to move while we were still recovering from the translation.'

'How long until we can make translation back to the warp?' asked Maloghurst.

Aximand's face twisted as though he were about to spit, then it settled, his eyes still on the mass of displays.

'Too long,' he hissed.

'This is Heta-Gladius,' breathed Maloghurst, looking at the displays. 'Our intelligence identified it as one of Dorn's cordon worlds to the Solar Segmentum.'

'The reports were accurate,' snarled Aximand.

'We are a long way off course,' said Maloghurst. 'We should translate back into the warp, even if it means running a storm.'

'Warp engines across two-thirds of the fleet are damaged. We need time before we can translate again. That's dependent on the warp surge that forced us out having ebbed. And what there is left to make the jump.'

'Even so, the Warmaster wills us to make all speed to Ullanor.'

‘Does he?’ said Aximand softly.

Maloghurst looked up at him sharply.

‘Yes, he does.’

Aximand was silent for a second, eyes flicking between displays. Maloghurst could almost taste the pressure of concentration in the air.

‘Where have you been?’

Maloghurst did not answer but moved to the warp engine control banks. Tech-priests were levering the scorched meat of servitors out of their cradles. Static-blurred runes spun across screens.

‘We need to get back into the warp and back–’

‘I asked you where you had been,’ said Aximand.

‘Where are the others?’ asked Maloghurst, looking around. ‘Where are Falkus and Tormageddon?’

Now it was Aximand’s turn not to reply, instead calling down to one of the serf officers.

‘As soon as the *Black Wolf* and the *Son of the Sword* are in formation, all ships close on the third fortress.’

‘We are going into the guns?’ asked Maloghurst.

‘We either strike or we sit here and take their cuts without reply. As you said, this is the Warmaster’s fleet. He does not falter, he conquers.’

The *Vengeful Spirit* began to slide forwards. Screens and displays showed the magnified images of the enemy fortress-stations and the dark barbs of their ships. The ships were spreading outwards and forwards, enveloping the *Vengeful Spirit*’s fleet in a cone with the star fortress cluster at its narrowest point. Behind it, the star of the system it was tethered to glimmered, a dot of silver just brighter than the firmament behind it.

‘The storms pushed us out just here…’ said Maloghurst to himself. Planets and star systems drew the currents of the warp to them like stones in a river, he knew that much. It was not surprising that a ship forced from it would exit close to a system, but to exit here in sight of the enemy’s guns…

‘Brace, brace, brace!’ called a mechanical voice. A second later the ship shook. The light of the void shields above the dome snapped. White flare-light blanked the void and stars.

‘Nova shell detonations!’ shouted a Legion deck officer. The screens dimmed as they compensated for the light of the explosions.

‘The *Black Wolf* reports shields down,’ called another voice. ‘Hull-wide fires.’

‘Three enemy ships identified as the *Angel Absolute* of the Ninth Legion, the *Crusader’s Blade* and the *Stoneheart* of the Seventh Legion.’

‘Enemy boarding waves in the void!’

Maloghurst watched as the three Legion vessels burned close and then kicked away as they loosed their volleys of gunships and boarding torpedoes. The boarding elements would be in defence turret range at the exact time that the enemy’s main guns began to fire. They would be riding into the detonation volumes of the thousands of macro shells. Dangerous. Very dangerous, but it would mean that some of them would reach their targets.

‘Brace!’

The void beyond the dome vanished in rolling blooms of fire.

‘Enemy boarding wave in turret range,’ called a flat mechanical voice. ‘Auspex and targeting systems at sixty-two per cent veracity. Firing.’

Maloghurst saw the short-range projection of the *Vengeful Spirit* flare with target kill markers.

‘Breach impacts, sections forty-two to forty-eight, level six-one-five!’

The deck lurched. Warning sirens began to sound. Maloghurst felt the memory of the plane of slaughter rise in his mind’s eye, its ground trembling with the drumbeat of explosions, the sky burning as the blood soaked the earth to mud.

‘Battles fought for pride, festering ambition, desires realised in darkness, all tip the balance one way or another,’ came the memory of Amarok’s voice. *‘And all the while Horus is getting weaker.’*

‘We have to go,’ he said, his voice dry. He could taste iron on his tongue. ‘You fool. Pull back. Pull us back and get us into the ether!’

Aximand turned his head to look at him.

‘Craven,’ he spat.

‘This is not chance, brother,’ said Maloghurst, trying to blink away a sudden wash of nausea. ‘For the Warmaster, we must leave. We must flee.’

‘No,’ growled Aximand and flicked a gesture at the edge of the chamber. Legionaries moved forwards, all wearing the gold-dipped skull faceplates of his warclan. ‘I command here.’

‘Horus commands,’ said Maloghurst.

‘And I am his truest son,’ said Aximand, his voice the fall of an axe edge. ‘And when he returns, he will see that I alone served him truly.’

Maloghurst looked at the circle of warriors, at the levelled muzzles of their guns. There was no point in saying that they could not do this, that he was the equerry of the Warmaster. It would make no difference. He saw it now. He saw the cracks in the Legion and its warriors. Pride, anger, fear even, perhaps – cracks that Horus and even Maloghurst himself had used to make them what they needed to be but which now yawned wide. Without Horus they were just warlords and killers trying to follow a dream they did not understand.

He smiled coldly. Aximand looked back, the light of the battle gleaming in his eyes. For a second he fancied he thought he saw a spark of doubt in that gaze. The deck shook.

'You are no Little Horus,' he said. 'You do not have the strength.'

'Take him,' said Aximand, and the skull-faced warriors closed around him.

Layak

They stepped from twilight into dead, red sunlight. Layak caught his breath as he looked around. His mask tightened on his face, and its mouth snarled wider. They stood on a mesa of black glass. Its summit was rippled, as though shaped by the retreat of a gently lapping sea. Things moved beneath the solid surface, though, pale things with manes of feelers and segmented bodies. Auroras of pink, emerald, gold and cyan billowed and folded in against a black sky above them. The sun itself was a ragged circle that lit the land beneath, but left the rancid sky untouched.

Beneath the mesa, a forest swayed. Silver trees murmured, their leaves chiming like bells. Things that might have been moths rose in clouds from one tree as Layak watched. Clouds of fine, grey dust scattered from them as they wheeled. Buildings rose from the canopy here and there, reaching for the sky with slender, serrated towers. Layak could see shapes moving against the horizon. For a second he thought they were striations in the layers of light, then he realised that they were the shadows of vast structures spanning the space between earth and sky like the ribs of a vast creature. They flexed as he looked at them, and he had the sense of both claustrophobia and comfort, as though he and all the world around him had been swallowed into a womb. Or a stomach.

'This was the cradle of the eldar race,' said Lorgar.

‘And its grave,’ said Actaea. She had come to stand beside Layak and the primarch. Her blind eyes were flicking back and forth beneath her shut eyelids. The crystal bulb of blood sat in her twitching hands.

‘It is a sacred place,’ breathed Lorgar. ‘Here a god was born. You can hear its birth cry still…’

For a second Layak wondered what his lord meant, but then, just as he was about to speak, every sound and sensation merged. The slow beat of the moth wings, the chime of the leaves and the sigh of the wind rose and blended, adding and combining until suddenly the world was roaring at him, the sound deafening and beautiful, and he knew that if he did not stop listening then he never would.

Around them, the remaining Word Bearers had fallen to their knees.

‘Your brother is here,’ said Actaea. ‘He knows you have arrived.’

‘Yet he waits for us to come to him,’ said Layak, looking at the shadows of cities on the horizon. He was sure that the silhouettes of the towers and domes had altered position since he had last looked.

‘He hides…’ he said.

Lorgar smiled. ‘He is merely letting us come to him. A petty exercising of power, a small thing, but to the exalted prince of the Last-Born God, no pleasure is too small. In this case his pride and arrogance are sacred.’

The primarch looked at Actaea. She was shivering. The calm that she wore like a cloak had been pulled away. She looked hunched, hunted.

‘Can you lead us to him?’ asked Lorgar. Actaea shivered and looked up at him, breathing raggedly, her attention seeming to pull back from somewhere inside her. She nodded, but her hand shook as she raised the crystal sphere of blood to her face.

‘This way,’ she said and then stepped towards the forests and distant sky. Lorgar followed. The Word Bearers rose from their knees and fell into a star formation around him. Only Layak held back, Kulnar and Hebek just behind him. The mask was murmuring hisses into his ears, but beyond that he thought he could hear other voices, familiar voices, saying things that he could not hear but felt that he wanted to know. Hebek turned his head to look at Layak. His eyes burned with mute hate.

‘I do not like it either,’ said Layak under his breath. ‘I do not like it at all.’ Then he followed. Beneath his feet, the pale creatures swam languidly through the black stone, grinning up with needle smiles.

They descended to the forest by a path that slid back and forth across the side of the mesa like the track left by a snake. The ground beneath the trees was dark, dappled by light falling through the shifting canopy.

Dust spores puffed into the air under their steps. Scent coiled through his mouth and nose, despite the seals of his mask showing green and the hooks clawing his nostrils. It smelled of flowers, of crushed spices, of sweat and organs freshly opened by a knife. His head spun, and only the cold metal pain of the inside of the mask held his thoughts from racing down paths filled with sharpness and the whisper of false promises.

The trees around them were grey-trunked, their bark soft and moist like the skin of a fish. They had been walking for longer than he could remember, but that was it… He could not…

There were faces…

Faces in the mauve twilight between the trees, watching, moving in and out of sight as they kept pace. He saw long legs, smooth muscle, obsidian eyes… of every creature that he had ever seen or read of in the Sixth Liber Chaotica, or the Books of Ybeion. And more: things he had never heard whisper of, daemons of every variety and form, haired, skin-sheathed or flayed, mute or drooling golden spittle into the mouths of their kin. And each was no more than a glimpse, a sliver of wonder and horror given to him and then snatched away by the sway of the trees.

The forest pressed closer and closer, and the faces came nearer with every glimpse. He had glimpsed realms of the Dark Prince where the cacophony of sound was such that it blurred the solidity of objects. Here, though, all was softness…

Layak wanted to sit down, to sit on the soft ground and let its soft dust cover and fill him, and wait for all the things that were watching from behind the tree trunks to come and find him, snuffling and giggling and sharp, and then…

‘*Sul-nu, Is’nag, sutep’ashn…*’ He spoke the words of warding as clearly as he could through the thick mass of spore powder that clogged his mask’s speaker-grille. He heard laughter as he forced out the words. But he kept speaking and kept walking.

Only Lorgar and Layak’s blade slaves moved as though unconcerned. Actaea was shaking, thoughts manifesting around her as spirals of light and the shadows of feathers. All of her power was focused on the sphere of blood that she clutched close to her face. She did not look beautiful or regal

now. She was hollowed and hunched, a crone with the skin of a girl, forcing herself to take the next step by will alone.

Layak saw one of his Word Bearers halt ahead. Layak was about to lash a command at him, when the warrior dropped his weapons, unfastened his helm and took a breath. The breath never ended. The warrior breathed and breathed, his neck swelling as the spore-laden air poured through his lips. The brothers near him stumbled to his side, moving as though wading through molasses. Lorgar raised a hand, and Layak felt the psychic force behind the gesture.

‘This is a sacred place,’ said Lorgar. ‘It must have its due.’

The warrior fell to his knees. His armour was splitting, wet vents yawning wide to breathe and breathe. A ripple of low hoots and cries chuckled from the forest. Grey roots were reaching up from the dust. Each of them was covered in smiling mouths. They pulled him down into the ground. A long psychic scream touched Layak’s mind and then was silent. A red stain spread across the ground where the warrior had been standing. Crystal roses began to grow from the spot, petals wet and bright.

‘It is close,’ hissed Actaea, voice trembling with effort. Blooms of darker red had blossomed on her robes. ‘Very close.’

Lorgar nodded. Behind the primarch, the grey trunks of the forest swayed and shivered. Beyond them there was something else, something that he could not quite see.

‘You know your duty, my son,’ he said. Layak nodded. He knew what he had been asked to do, what he was here for. He knew.

Lorgar stepped forwards. Layak followed, and suddenly the forest was behind them, and above them were towers and walls and domes reaching up and up to a perfect, powder-blue sky.

Layak halted. Beside him, the surviving warriors were frozen in reverence. Actaea folded slowly to the ground, her hands crooked claws around the sphere of blood that had led them here.

Lorgar closed his eyes briefly, as though to see the sight for the first time again.

‘The City-Palace of the Princeling of Perfection,’ he said. ‘The gods have blessed us.’

Above them, trumpets wailed from the towers.

Volk

The chamber was spherical. Fused black glass skinned its walls. Stalactites projected inwards from them, their tips needle fingers pointing to the thing that lay at its heart.

To Volk's eyes it was a vast statue cut from a lump of black stone. Its features were crude and seemed to have been hacked into the stone in blunt relief. Its limbs were held tight to its bulk, its legs folded beneath, its arms clutched close. It reminded Volk of a primitive gargoyle. Rows of teeth snarled from beneath lidless eyes. Wings sat curled on its back, and each of the eight arms folded across its torso and back held a different weapon: a knife, an axe, a sword. Chains bound it, looping over it, punching into the stone and radiating away to the edge of the chamber. The links glowed yellow and white with heat. Pools of molten metal hung in the air, filling from cascades that poured from openings dotting the inner surface of the chamber. The statue's serrated smile gathered shadows from the furnace glow.

Volk wanted to look away, but his gaze held on the statue. Memories filled him, pressing into his mind like claws into wet clay. He felt the bite of a stone edge in his neck, and knew that the hand that had knapped the flint was the first to make such a tool not to cut wood or kill for food, but for murder. He felt the heat on his face as the hammer fell on the twisted rods of steel, blow by blow making them a sword that would carry a song of conquest into the future. He felt the kick of the rifle butt into his shoulder, tasted the black powder smoke in the back of his throat, felt the caress of a thousand tools of death as they touched history for the first time.

Argonis shifted beside him, and suddenly he was aware of the others standing with him on that lip of stone gazing at the statue. Perturabo stalked forwards, slowly, the shell of his exo-armour moving with a whisper.

Volk tried to move but could not. Heat threaded through him, whispering as it touched servos, spreading in a murmur across interface links.

Son of my son. Volk heard the voice, heard it echo, but knew that it had spoken inside his skull to him alone. It was deep, like the sound of distant guns. ***I have waited and watched you for so long. I have so much to give you.***

Pain flooded him. He was falling without moving, the sight of the cavern a circle shrinking above him as he plunged down and down. Every piece of flesh in his body felt as though it were cooking, the nerves singing as the sinew charred. He tried to claw himself up but the light of the present was

growing smaller. All he could remember was the past broken into shards: the first cut of a knife through his skin; the clatter of a gun chamber eating rounds; the roar of enemies charging, more numerous than the bullets ripping them apart; and the hunger for more strength, for a sharper edge, for the power to tear them down and leave them as blood in the mud. He was there screaming the song of the killing edge and the bullet's kiss.

Do not resist. There is so much that you will be. The voice was a patchwork of gunfire and explosions, the sound stitched together from slices of a life spent living to destroy, endure and destroy again. ***So long have you endured, but you were not meant to survive. You were meant to be cast down, to burn and break. That is the dream of your souls, and the dream you shall live. I give, so must I take. And I shall give to you, but before that I have a service that you must do for me.***

Volk felt the presence rise in him. He could fight, but he did not want to. The voice in his skull did not sound like something to deny. It sounded like the wishes and fears he had held ever since he had come from the wreck cities. He had always been strong, but never strong enough, a killer but never equal to the enemies that came against him. And now he knew he would be.

Iron within. Iron without.

He opened the last stitch of his soul, and the furnace fire poured into him.

He opened his mouth.

'My son,' said the daemon. The Iron Circle turned, weapons rising. Argonis' bolter was in his hand and levelled. Volk's gaze rose to meet them. His face was a mask over fire. Roaring light spilled from the holes of his eyes. The metal of his augmetics was red with heat. The daemon looked down the barrels of the guns and smiled. ***'Sons of my son. I have waited long for your coming.'***

The plates and pistons down Perturabo's back twitched in sequence before he turned.

'You are the creature that is bound here,' he said.

'Bound, preserved, hidden, set free… It is a matter of perspective.'

'You are bound,' said Perturabo, and raised the head of his hammer to point at the daemon's burning grin. 'And being bound you can suffer. Do not play games with me. I am here for information that you shall give me.'

‘I know,’ said the daemon***. ‘You seek your brother. You seek the Eightfold Prince of Slaughter. I know this, Perturabo. I have watched him through the eyes of the guns that fire on his fields of battle. I know that Horus has sent you to bring Angron back, a dog sent to drag its rabid kin back to the hearth.’***

Perturabo did not move or speak. Then he was across the gap between him and Volk’s body, his hand clamped around Volk’s throat, lifting him off the floor. He held him there, pistons and servos hissing as they braced. He looked into the fire pouring from Volk’s eyes. His face was impassive.

Heat washed from Volk’s mouth as the daemon chuckled.

‘I am the red in your blood and the edge of your blade, Lord of Iron.’ The voice weighted the title with mockery.

‘I know your kind,’ said Perturabo. ‘I have seen your heart. I have felt the kindness of your lies.’

‘The bastard child of the Emperor cut you deep, my son,’ said the daemon. ***‘He took so much from you, your strength, your certainty. I can see it, you are bleeding still.’*** Volk’s hand rose. Perturabo’s grip tightened, but the daemon simply tapped the plates covering the primarch’s forearm with a metal digit***. ‘All the Iron without will not heal such wounds.’*** A muscle twitched in Perturabo’s temple***. ‘But a weapon, Perturabo, a weapon to match that of the gods… Then what would the lies of my kind mean? You sought such a weapon on Tallarn. Yes, and had it torn from your grasp by the brother you serve. But you never thought to look within.’***

Perturabo was silent for a long moment, then released his grip on Volk’s throat, but the warrior remained hanging in the air, the burning grin still in place.

‘What is this that you have brought us to?’ asked Argonis, the words coming dry from his mouth but his bolter steady.

‘He brought you to where he thought he could find answers,’ said the daemon through Volk’s mouth. ***‘But his path leads him in a circle down, ever down. No matter how far you try to move away, back you come to the black heart. He keeps finding the answers he does not want to hear.’***

The daemon was still looking at Argonis.

‘The courts and principalities of the ether are at war, scrambling over the soul of your Warmaster and his bastard brothers. You are a sharp edge, Argonis. A sharp edge… I know you. I was in your hand when you

killed for the first time. Every edge you honed was a song I heard.' It smiled with the half-metal ruin of Volk's mouth.

'Release him, daemon,' snarled Argonis.

'You actually care, don't you? I have no heart for human attachments. Only the severance matters, but you have a murderer's soul, Argonis. You should not care what happens to this one any more than you cared what happened to the brothers you killed on Isstvan, or the other tunnel children you left bleeding for food before you became the Unscarred.' It smiled. Molten metal stretched between Volk's teeth. ***'You should not care, yet care you do. Like a brother.'***

'Enough,' said Perturabo, and the word echoed over the roar of the molten iron falling from the world above. 'You are the heart of Sarum. The Red Priests are yours. What they know, you know. So answer me now – where is Angron? How can we find him?'

'The same way you can find any beast gone rabid – follow the carcasses and the cries of the dying.'

'That is not an answer.'

'Come, son of Iron, do not disappoint your father. I have given you many gifts in the long years, but this one thing cannot be given freely.'

'How long have you been bound here?' asked Argonis, before Perturabo could speak. Volk's head pivoted towards him.

'Since times lost and unremembered, wolf of Cthonia. I was there when the first soul made a tool to take life. I was born in bones sharpened to points and flint shattered into arrowheads. The roar of gunpowder and the curve of the scimitar are my breath and the smile I give to the battlefield.' Embers breathed from Volk's mouth. What remained of his visible flesh was black and blistering***. 'Others were born from the first murder, but the first weapon was my mother and the hand that made it my father. And every kill you make, I am with you in the making of. I am the muse of atrocity, and such songs have you made with the instruments I gave you.'***

'Yet you are trapped here,' said Argonis. 'I have seen your kind. I have seen the Warmaster summon and dismiss the most powerful of your kin. They do not sit in chains.' He looked from Volk to Perturabo. 'This is a thing of deceit, lord. A creature that will barter any lie to be free.'

'But I do not want freedom, son of Horus.' Argonis blinked then. ***'I am a prisoner who appreciates that its bars keep others out as much as they***

keep me in. Freedom is not the price for what you ask.'

Silence fell, stretching, broken only by the creak of Volk's armour as it strained with growing heat.

'What is the price?' said Perturabo at last.

'Are you set on doing as Horus asks, or are you going to turn aside?'

'My course is set,' said Perturabo. 'Speak your price.'

'There is a song to destruction, Perturabo. Every blade, every bullet, sings its song in the shadow of our realm. You have been hearing this song for your whole life. All I wish is that you open your soul to it – that you sing your song of obliteration, so that I may hear it.'

'I will not give you my soul,' said Perturabo, his voice a rasp of warning. 'Not you nor any of your kind.'

'I know, but I will hear you sing for me, son of Iron and Blood. It is not the price of what you ask. It is the consequence of the path you walk. The price was hearing you say that you would not turn aside, and hearing the truth in your words. You cannot give me your soul, Perturabo. You have been ours since life sparked in your flesh.'

Perturabo flicked a hand. The Iron Circle surged forwards with a boom of released pistons. Explosive rounds roared from the cannons on their shoulders. Volk twitched as the gunfire tore into him. His body was distorting with heat now, the armour plates flowing soft, the flesh glowing like unquenched steel. Within, he watched and heard every word coming from his lips, but he was not listening. He could hear the sound of eternity roaring around him.

'Deluge,' said the daemon. ***'You will find what you seek on Deluge.'***

Perturabo turned and stepped towards the door they had come through.

'He is not your brother any longer,' said the daemon, ***'any more than the serpent-child fool that was Fulgrim is anything other than an echo of the being you knew. They are slaves, chained to the power that remade them.'***

'Give me back my son,' said Perturabo, his voice low, his eyes unblinking. 'Or I will shatter this prison that keeps you free from the tides of your master and vile kin. You talk too much, creature. You do not wish freedom from your chains. You want to keep the freedom from the god that would claim you. Give me my son.'

The daemon was silent. The air shimmered around Volk's body.

‘I am not going to give him back to you,’ said the daemon. ***‘I am going to give you a weapon. There are betrayals still waiting for you, Lord of Iron. Other brothers that will turn on you as Fulgrim did.’***

‘Who?’

‘Not Angron, not any who are shackled to the gods. Mortal treachery cuts deeper than that of gods, for what promises did gods ever make that they can betray?’

Volk’s body dropped to the rocky floor, a jumble of half-melted metal and cooked meat.

‘Do you know what a weapon is, Perturabo? It is a question. Hold a knife against a throat and you have to ask – what am I?’

Volk’s body twitched. Perturabo’s weapons loaded and charged with a clatter of ammunition and a buzz of charge coils.

‘You see, for all of the beautiful-terrible things that I have helped mortals create, they are just matter. A knife’s edge means nothing. The bullet is just metal before it leaves the barrel.’

The mass of armour and bubbling flesh began to stand. Somehow a voice still came from its mouth.

‘It takes a soul and mind to pull the trigger, to make a tool a weapon.’ The last syllable was a creaking hiss from charred lips. The figure that had been Volk raised its head, and opened its eyes.

TWELVE

Maloghurst

They did not chain him. He supposed that act was a measure of respect. His cell was a complex of rooms in the Black Levels. The vastness of the *Vengeful Spirit* meant that there were sections of hull that rarely felt the steps of feet, and some that through disuse or old battle damage were left lightless and without power or air. Even with the ship fully operational, the momentum of conquest always left places that it was simpler to seal off than repair. These volumes of darkness were like dead flesh in the body of the ship, he thought sometimes, haunted by the scars of old battles. Maloghurst had used some of these airless mazes himself in the past. There was always a need for places out of sight and mind. Now he found himself a prisoner of one.

They had let him have his amour, of course, but had drained it of almost all power, so that his limping walk was a slow plod. If he, say, tried to smash through one of the armoured bulkheads that closed him in, he would drain its reserves before he even made a dent, and then he would be left with nothing to do but breathe. They had even locked a collar around his throat inside the armour. It was brass, spiked on the inside and, he was told, able to sense disturbances in the warp. If he tried to use sorcery it would drive the spikes into his neck until they met in the middle. He wondered where Aximand had got it from.

The deck trembled and kept trembling. Maloghurst paused, counting as the rumbling vibration continued.

Sustained firing, he thought. The ship was unleashing its full weapon manifold.

‘Pride,’ he breathed to himself as he trudged down a lightless corridor. He had walked the entire volume of the sealed space three times in different patterns and had found no possible way out, not even a means of

communicating with the rest of the ship. Even if he could, though, who could he trust? He thought of the way that Sota-Nul had left his side just before he had gone to the strategium. A sign of betrayal or a coincidence? He did not know which. But Aximand had suspected something. Poor doubting, fearful and fierce Little Horus… He had always had flaws, but Maloghurst had not expected this.

You were warned, came a thought, in a voice that sounded like Amarok's.

'We should talk.' The voice was a chorus of knife tips scraped over metal in Maloghurst's mind. Frost spread over the walls and floor, sparkling in the glow of his helm's eyepieces. A static charge tingle ran over his skin.

Tormageddon stepped into view, its form seeming to coalesce from the dark. Its head was bare, its face powdered with ice crystals. It was smiling the fixed smile of a jackal, sharp teeth white in red gums. Its eyes were clouded pearl, with shattered amber irises and slit pupils. Its hands were empty at its sides.

'Talk…' said Maloghurst carefully. The daemonhost halted. Not for the first time Maloghurst wondered at the nature of the daemon he had helped draw into Grael Noctua's flesh. He had helped create the creature, providing the body in which it could walk the world, but he had not bound it to his will. The Luperci that he had created were creatures of twin souls, mergers of Legion flesh and daemon-thing, hybrids of being. Tormageddon was not that. As far as he could tell, nothing remained of the hosts it had taken. All that remained of Grael Noctua were the traces of his features beneath the daemon's touch. And the daemon itself… It claimed to be a thing formed from the husk of dead Torgaddon's soul, a revenant born of the culling of the Legion at Isstvan, from the warp ripples created by that act of betrayal. Was that true? Could that be true? Maloghurst had doubts enough not to trust it, even though Horus had exalted it by placing it in his council. Who did the daemon serve, and to what end? Now more than ever, the question seemed most in need of an answer.

Maloghurst looked around the dark passages. 'Is your visit sanctioned by the others?'

'I go where I will,' replied the daemonhost.

'I have heard that before.'

Tormageddon shrugged, the strangely fluid movement sending frost dust falling to the floor.

‘Little Horus does not have the means to stop me if he tried.’

‘What side are you on, creature?’ asked Maloghurst. Tormageddon tilted its head, as though in question. ‘You know of what I speak, daemon.’

Tormageddon raised its head, still smiling its needle smile.

‘Your fickle kind will see us lose this war,’ said Maloghurst, ‘will see the Warmaster fail on the point of victory.’

‘Would it surprise you, Maloghurst, if I said I did not care…’

Maloghurst held its amber stare, and then shook his head.

‘No, it would not.’

‘I just want to ask you a question, Maloghurst…’ The voice hissed at the edges, as though it had been whispered by several throats. ***‘Why do* you *care?’***

‘The Warmaster–’

‘You are a man who has power, subtlety…’ It moved forwards, raising its hand to trace the remains of Noctua’s features with its fingers. ***‘Ruthlessness… Yet you do not thirst for your own ends. You have the soul of a lord and yet bind yourself as a servant… Why?’***

Maloghurst blinked for a second, and in the corner of his mind he saw the fire painting the walls of the mine cave with the shadows of the gangers. Laughter pulled mouths back into wolf grins. He smelled the tang of ore dust and cinders, the smell of a home left far behind.

‘For reasons that are my own,’ he said. The daemonhost was watching him, its pupils black razor slits in its eyes.

‘You will do anything to see him win this war…’ it said.

‘You know that I will.’

Tormageddon nodded once.

‘Yes,’ it replied, ***‘I do know. The question is, are you willing to let others pay the same price?’***

‘What do you mean?’

‘War, Maloghurst. War and murder.’

Maloghurst blinked again, and in the slice of time saw the daemon Amarok wearing Iacton Qruze’s face, the parchment pinned to his chest, the word ‘murder’ glistening wet and red.

‘You think you can bring Horus back, can help him win the war within him…’

‘I can.’

‘Perhaps… But you need to move out from the shadows, and put aside your spider’s ways for a time. Aximand will not let you do as you intend out of ignorance, and Kibre will not let you out of fear. Abaddon is not here to take the cause either way. So you are left here chained in the dark while Lupercal withers in dreams, and you can do nothing.’

He must submit…

‘Is that what you came here for?’ Maloghurst snarled. ‘To offer an observation of futility?’

‘No, I came to see if you would accept my offer to give you command of the Legion.’

The ship shook again in the silence. The recoil of guns and the impact of munitions trembled through Maloghurst as the daemon’s words hung in his skull.

He shook his head.

‘We are a Legion,’ he said. ‘We are the Warmaster’s sons. We do not turn on each other.’

‘Yes, we do,’ said the daemon. The voice was a dry rasp using withered vocal cords, but it was recognisable. It was not the blade rasp of the daemon’s thought-voice, nor the lilting growl of Grael Noctua. It was the voice of Torgaddon, half a decade dead on the pyre of Isstvan III.

‘Kibre and Aximand are loyal to Lupercal, they are–’

‘They are in the way. What do you want, Maloghurst? To help your Warmaster or to let loyalty to an ideal you helped murder stay your hand?’

Murder… The word caught again in his thoughts.

‘It will need care.’

‘What does not?’

He looked at the daemon’s eyes.

‘What power do you serve that you would help me so, creature?’

‘My ends are my own.’

And that answer worries me more than anything else, he thought.

‘Very well, brother,’ he said. ‘We have an agreement. Let war and murder be done.’

The daemon’s smile was still in the mask of its face as it bowed its head.

Layak

The palace, which was a city, wept as they processed through it. Cries of pain and loss and joy tumbled and echoed down the roads. Figures, some human, many not, flung themselves at their feet, pleading in hisses before cutting their own throats. Most continued to babble as their blood spread over the pure white marble. All of them had been crying before they died, Layak noted. The sounds rose up the walls of the buildings and flowed back down, the noise deafening. Figures watched them pass from delicate balconies projecting from the side of the smooth-sided towers. Mutants with the heads of bulls and bodies of oiled muscle huffed and snorted, brandishing hook-bladed swords and fists of razor chains. Bloated heaps of flesh in sheaths of silk and velvet chattered in a high, brittle tongue that Layak had never heard. Amongst them the Neverborn moved, sliding between forms lithe, languid, toothed and clawed, caressing and stinging the mortals at whim. Layak's mind blurred with the beat of the warp-saturated air. He could no longer pick apart what was crafted of thought or matter; the two had merged, as interchangeable as song or speech.

'We are being watched,' said Actaea.

'Of course we are,' replied Lorgar.

No one had stopped them entering. Indeed, he had not seen any gates or structures that could be called fortifications, but the threat he felt increased with every step.

'No,' said Actaea, 'I do not mean daemons, or sorcery. There are… forces watching us. I can feel them.'

'I know,' said Lorgar. Actaea did not reply.

Their path led up and up, curving around towers and circling domes of brightly coloured glass and polished silver. Layak could detect the geometry of the eldar in their lines, but minutely altered, as though the mind that had guided the hand that had made every tower, pillar and door had intended a subtle mockery and insult. Every wall was softly curved, the angles pulling in the eye and not releasing it until it had guided it to a statue of pearl, a pool of water floating with towers, a flayed figure hanging in a web of bell-hung chains, its moans a perfect discord with the chimes. Occasionally they crossed a span between two structures and looked down on a canal of clear water or a road choked with bodies, winged daemons squatting amongst the carcasses, lips and hands red.

'What path are we following?' asked Layak. A daemon looked up at him and refolded its flayed-skin wings. Actaea looked at him but then looked

away.

‘None,’ said Lorgar, ‘but we will reach Fulgrim. He will be where he always is when it is his choice – at the centre of things. He just wants to show off first.’

As Lorgar spoke they came into a wide piazza. Statutes of alabaster, marble and jade ringed it, each figure perfect at a glance but more monstrous the closer one looked. Water chuckled into the air from gold fountain heads in the shape of perfect human men and women. Layak saw wide, bloodshot eyes staring out from the sockets of one of the statues and thought he heard a gagged, silent scream in his mind. A crowd filled the open space. Bright silks flowed in the warm breeze. Masked faces turned to look at them, sorrow and joy in jewels and velvet. The crowd parted as they walked forwards. Willow-thin figures in pink tunics appeared from amongst the press and scattered grey flower petals and ashes into the air. Layak saw that all of them had either eyes, or mouths, or a nose, or ears, but never more than one.

‘Aurelian, Aurelian, Aurelian…’ they sang.

The ashen petals settled on the ground before their feet as they walked on. A spindle-thin dancer clad in purple spun across their path. A horned mask hid its face, but it held up a hand to them. Lorgar halted, Layak and the rest behind him. The dancer bowed, laughed and then cartwheeled to the side, and behind it the last of the crowd parted like a curtain before a stage.

A figure lay on a dais before them. It was bloated, its flesh hanging in soft rolls from its torso. Layak could see tiny, podgy hands protruding from the folds of fat. Its lower body was serpentine. Pearlescent scales covered the coiled mass. Scales peeled back to show green eyes. A small head, its features sunken into flesh, sat atop the mass of its body, a long spill of white hair hanging from its scalp. Splashes of blood, and dark liquid that might have been wine, mottled its skin. It shifted as they approached, its bulk bursting cushions. The crowd nearest it was trembling. Some were eating their own flesh. Blood spattered the white stone beneath their feet.

‘Lorgarrr…’ it hissed as they approached, the word forming patterns of writhing smoke as it left its lips. Three of the Word Bearers had fallen to their knees, others were swaying like reeds in a breeze.

It was vile. Layak had looked on the amassed horrors of the warp, had bound them and carried out deeds to earn their favour. But to even look at the heaped mass on the dais was to feel one’s soul stretched and siphoned

off, to feel every denied desire rise from the recesses of dreams. He recognised it even though he had never seen it. It was a most sacred abomination, and he had never felt a stronger desire to reduce it to molten fat and burnt skin. It was also not Fulgrim.

He turned to Lorgar, words forming on his tongue, but the thing on the dais spoke again.

'Welcommme…' it said, the words shivering through its body. It smiled, pink lips pulling back over bladed teeth red with blood and wine. The tiny hands hanging from its torso flexed. '***Welcommme… to my cityyy… my realmmm… my worlddd… brother miiine…'***

Lorgar stared at the thing, his face expressionless in its serenity.

'No,' he said. 'This is not your city, daemon.' He turned to look around at the whimpering and laughing crowd. 'Show yourself, Fulgrim.'

The bloated creature on the dais hissed like a cat, and a rattle-tipped tail rose into the air from its coils.

'It is well, my sweet,' said a voice like honey. The purple-clad dancer somersaulted forwards, bowed low, then swept the mask from its face and snapped into a perfect high-salute, the arm holding the mask raised above its head, weight balanced on the points of its toes. ***'My brother simply cannot take a joke***,' said Fulgrim and giggled. '***Not even a small one.'***

The face of the dancer shone with perfection. Every line and feature was the truth that sculptors had reached for in the greatest works of art and failed to grasp. He peeled the velvet from his head, and ice-white hair spilled out, catching in the breeze and billowing out behind him. He glided closer to Lorgar, growing in size with every step so that he stood eye to eye with the primarch of the Word Bearers. A smile hooked the edge of his mouth up over ivory teeth.

'Brother,' he said. ***'I hope that this will be pleasant.'***

Lorgar remained silent.

Fulgrim shrugged, the gesture like a ripple of wind.

'Maybe that is too much to hope for.' He turned away, and Layak caught the flash of a silver dagger in Fulgrim's hand. He surged forwards, pulling the blade slaves with him…

But Fulgrim brought the blade down across his own torso. The velvet parted and fell away from alabaster muscle. The daemon primarch stepped out of the fallen suit, and as his bare foot touched stone it changed. Scales spread up his leg, sheathing his flesh as it swelled. His other leg was gone,

vanished into the serpent coils that grew beneath him as he slid forwards. A second set of arms reached out from the side of his torso. Rings glittered on the fingers, winking like flaring stars. Fulgrim reached the dais and flowed up its side. The bloated thing squirmed in greeting, uncoiling its bulk and twining it around Fulgrim as he embraced it. The thing purred up at the daemon primarch, baring its teeth. Fulgrim ran a hand over its hair.

'There, N'kari, my delight… We will have bliss again once this is done with, but he is family, and that means I should listen to what he says, hmm? At least a little.'

N'kari… It was not its true name – that was a thing that would have broken reality to speak – but in the realm of the warp it was like a signature drawn in atrocity. Layak had glimpsed it and heard it at the edge of bloody visions, but never seen it before. Now it sat before him. N'kari… Eater of Delight, the Son of Ruin, the Daughter of Delight, one of the Six Courtesans of the Dark Prince.

Fulgrim settled next to the exalted daemon, their snake bodies intertwining with a sigh, then turned his gaze back on Lorgar. A hush fell over the piazza before flowing out into the city. Screams and songs strangled in throats. Gongs and flutes fell silent.

'So…' he said, and the smile had gone from his face. ***'What shall we talk about?'***

Argonis

Argonis entered Perturabo's audience chamber as the *Iron Blood* moved to the edge of the Sarum System. A layer of metallic dust covering the floor spoke to the chamber's abandonment. Argonis had last stood here when the *Iron Blood* sat in the orbit of Tallarn. Perturabo had not used the chamber since the close of that campaign. He shunned it for its association with humiliation, Argonis suspected, but now it had a new use.

Volk stood at the foot of the throne, still and silent.

If it is still Volk, thought Argonis. Either way he wanted to know.

Argonis had detected no breath or beating hearts as he entered the throne room, and Volk gave no sign of being aware that he was there. Volk did know he was there. Argonis could feel that truth in the prickle of threat running down his spine as he stepped closer to the thing that had been his friend. The Iron Warrior's body no longer looked like that of a legionary,

augmented or not. It no longer looked like anything that had started as human.

He had… grown. The metal of his armour and augmentations had taken on a smooth, flesh-like texture. Steel sinews stretched between plates. Arms bulged like ripe fruit, skinned in gunmetal. Volk's head sat in the helmet socket, bare, the remaining flesh pale and threaded with dark veins. The augmetics grafted to his skull after his injury had sunk into the flesh, flowing to match the shape of lost bone so that now two-thirds of his face was a steel skull. His eyes were shut. The closed lids still looked like flesh.

Argonis looked at him for several minutes. He knew what the Warmaster's allies were. He had seen Horus unleash those allies in person. He had stood with the Luperci, seen men like Maloghurst and Telekrey rip the life from the living with a word. He knew the name that was given to those allies and knew that it was a truth: daemons. They had brought the creatures of old myth back to destroy the Emperor's age of illumination. And that did not trouble him. In such a conflict there could be no limits on how war was waged. He did not exist to doubt or question. He was the Warmaster's will. That was what he had decided after Isstvan, after his moment of weakness. But here he was looking at something that he could not place into that scheme of honour and oaths.

'Volk?' he said, the word vanishing into the empty dark. 'Brother, can you hear me?' No reply came. Volk might have been a statue. Or a corpse. He let out a breath. His hands – always steady – fidgeted to the grip of his pistol. 'Legion…' he said, blinking as the word came from his lips. 'Brotherhood… Loyalty… It's simple, isn't it? So simple. Even when you are killing each other, you just redraw the lines. You hold on to the words but give them a different edge. Legion becomes those who follow the Warmaster's vision. Brotherhood becomes those who have dipped their hands in the same blood. Loyalty becomes…' His voice trailed off. He had drawn his bolt pistol. It was Martian-made and marked with the memories of Cthonia. Gang runes glinted in the claws of the eagle that spread its wings in gold on the casing, and a mirror coin had been worked into the pistol butt. It was the weapon of a gang warlord, a mark of status, a tool of execution.

He hesitated, black gaze fixed on the closed eyes in the steel skull. He raised the pistol. The barrel was level with the closed right eye. His finger tightened on the trigger.

The eye opened. Argonis' trigger finger froze. The eye was silver from edge to edge. He fired as Volk's hand clamped over the pistol barrel. The bolt tore into the palm. Shreds of metal scattered out. Argonis flinched back as shrapnel kissed his face. Volk stepped forwards, still gripping the pistol. His hand was a torn ruin. Blood fell to the floor, hissing from red to chrome. But he did not let go. Tendrils of metal coiled over the pistol. The metal of the housing began to glow red. Argonis let go, hand going to his sword. Volk raised the weapon. His arm was swelling, swallowing the gun like tar swallowing a stone.

Argonis had his sword free. It lit with a crackle of activating power. Volk looked at the weapon. Lightning danced in the mirrors of his eyes. He raised his hand. The fluid mass was hardening into cold metal. Firing mechanisms grew. Ejection ports opened, and a gun barrel sprouted. Argonis looked into the black circle of the muzzle. It was the perfect diameter for a bolt pistol. He could see rifling spiralling down the inside into the dark beyond. On the casing behind it an eagle in gold flowed into being, then set. Argonis looked beyond the gun, his drawn sword raised but still.

Volk was staring at him, unreadable. Then his arm snapped back. Argonis watched as the gun welded to his hand broke apart, disassembling and dissolving in a heartbeat. Volk's empty hand remained. He stepped back into the same position and posture he had been in before. Argonis lowered his sword but kept it lit. Volk's eyes were still open.

'Did you choose this, brother?' he asked, surprised as the question came from his mouth. 'Did you choose to become this?'

Volk remained silent, then looked up as though he had heard something. He nodded to himself and closed his eyes.

And the klaxons began to howl.

Argonis swore and ran for the doors, clamping on his helm as he moved. Data flooded his senses as he reconnected to the strategic feed. It took him five seconds to assimilate the approximation of the situation, and in that time he was already a hundred metres away and sprinting for the strategium. Blast doors peeled open in front of him, and guards and gun pods stood down as they read his clearance.

'How many now?' he called as he entered the strategium. Perturabo stood at the centre of his curtain of screens and holo-displays.

‘Twenty,’ replied Forrix. ‘They have just exited the warp at the system edge. Largest displacement is one-third our mass, but they are coming on fast. Auspex confirms they are at full battle readiness.’

Of course they are, thought Argonis. The XIII Legion was always battle-ready. He looked at where a smaller tactical image flickered on the officer’s screen. Twenty ships were running through the void, splitting into four clusters as they came on. Names and tactical information scrolled beside the display: *Catullus*, Agentha-class strike cruiser; *Truth of Honour*, Credo-class strike corvette; *Sword of the Five Hundred*, Maegaron-class strike cruiser, and so on, the details plucked from the honour rolls of the Great Crusade.

Argonis clamped his teeth shut over a rising stream of Cthonian invective. How had the Ultramarines got this far, this fast? They were far beyond the front made by Guilliman’s secondary forces, but the outer edge of the XIII Legion’s battle groups was supposed to be weeks of travel and months of fighting away. But the display did not lie. They were here. By ill luck or design, they were here.

‘They will not be able to defeat us,’ said Forrix. ‘The relative force factors are–’

‘They do not need to defeat us,’ snapped Argonis. ‘They just need to delay us.’

The Iron Warrior looked as though he was about to argue.

‘It’s a vanguard fleet,’ said Argonis, straightening. The memory of Volk’s cold, calm eyes flashed in his mind. He breathed out. ‘They don’t need to defeat us, because coming just behind them is a full Ultramarines assault fleet.’

He looked up at Perturabo. The primarch returned his gaze through the holo-projections.

‘We know where Angron is,’ said Argonis. ‘The Warmaster’s will is not that we stand and fight here. We should run.’

Perturabo’s weapon mounts clattered. His eyes were black spheres sparkling with the curtain of raw data falling past him.

Argonis remembered the flash of reflected lightning in Volk’s eyes.

‘Did you choose this, brother?’

‘I am the red in your blood and the edge of your blade, Lord of Iron,’ said the memory of the daemon’s voice.

Perturabo was perfectly still for a second, and then seemed to shiver.

‘We run,’ he said.

THIRTEEN

Ekaddon

The *Vengeful Spirit* rode a sea of fire. Weapon discharge and muzzle flare hid its hull. Its void shields shattered under incoming fire, the inner layers regenerating as the outers snapped out of being. Around it rode its sisters of war, each ship holding close to its monarch, their batteries firing without cease. Around them their enemies spun. Strobing cords of light linked foes, binding them together, slashing the dark to black tatters.

The string of defence platforms hanging in the void pulsed fire from a distance, and beyond them the five star fortresses waited for the battle to enter the volume between their guns. Each of them spun in place, crenellated pinwheels set amongst the stars. Their sub-bastions held enough firepower to match a ship of the line. Together they could destroy a fleet. The outer fortress was already firing, batteries of cannons and torpedo racks loosing as they rotated into alignment.

The *Vengeful Spirit* and her sisters plunged on into the cauldron of fire between the fortresses. To a mundane understanding it would have seemed foolhardy, but it was a calculated act of aggression. As it came on it dragged the warships with it, hugging them close in an embrace of point-blank weapon fire. From the outside, the target volume was a cauldron of radiation, plasma bloom and debris. That made accurate fire difficult. The scattered ships of both sides were so close that they jumbled together in the reckoning of gunnery systems and targeting cogitators. The Sons of Horus plunged on, accelerating, mauling the ships that came to meet them, closing on the nearest fortress like a knife point forced down into flesh through struggling arms.

Void battles could be conducted at hyper-range, in calculations and manoeuvres that played out like the ticking of clockwork. This was not a battle of that breed. This was a brawl. Every ship in the battle sphere was

taking and giving fire. Hulls split. Gas vented from wounds driven through metres of stone and metal. Fires roared into the blackness before choking off as they consumed the air that fuelled them. Munitions detonated in flowers of nucleonic-blue and fusion-red. And every vessel torn apart as its reactor detonated, every impact of a breaching craft stabbing through adamantium plate, was a flash of silent colour in the mute dark of the night.

The sounds filling the guts of the *Vengeful Spirit* came from within not without. Ekaddon's ears vibrated with the pulse of guns and engines as he moved down the companionway. He had spent most of his life in the void, and much of that time on the Warmaster's flagship, and could read such sounds as though they were the vessel's voice. He heard that voice clearly now: the ship was at maximum damage output, its reactors running close to the danger margin, shields collapsing as fast as they were brought back online – but it was exultant, growling its defiance and pleasure at the lives its weapons took.

'Enemy have breached the hull one deck down,' said Kobarak as they hurried through the pulsing alert light. Ekaddon glanced back at his honour squad's signals officer. Kobarak's red eyes returned his look from beneath the studded brow of his helm.

'Strength?'

'Estimated at fifty, but they are Ninth Legion. Seventeenth Company are moving to counter.'

Ekaddon felt the muscles in his jaw twitch.

'That will be a fight,' he said. 'But not our fight.' Kobarak did not reply. Like the rest of his command squad the signals specialist knew what they were committing to. Ekaddon had selected all nine with care. They were all blooded warriors of the Cathartidae and wore the coin of that brotherhood on a cord around their sword arms. All owed their place in the Reavers of the First Company to him, and all had killed Legion brothers. Ambition flowed in their blood almost as thickly as the genes of their sire. They were killers who dreamed of being warlords, and they would follow Ekaddon on his path without hesitation.

The corridor trembled again, and the sound of an explosion rose above the blare of sirens and the clang of their boots on the deck.

'Here,' said Ekaddon, pausing and yanking up a wide hatch close to the floor. Flakes of rust and dust fell from its edges. The squad moved into

position along the corridor walls, weapons covering both directions, pistols drawn. Ekaddon braced to drop through the hatch.

‘Halt and identify!’ The call came down the passage behind them and over the vox. Six armoured figures were moving down the corridor in loose battle order, the yellow alert light gleaming from the golden eyes on their pauldrons. ‘Identify,’ came the challenge again. Ekaddon recognised the voice: Hegron, lieutenant of the 17th Company, a capable if straightforward warrior.

‘Stand down, Hegron,’ said Ekaddon.

The other warriors halted but did not lower their weapons, Ekaddon noted.

‘I was not informed of your presence in this area of the ship, captain. Full battle condition is in place,’ said Hegron, his head moving fractionally as his gaze shifted to the hatch that Ekaddon had just pulled open. ‘And this area of the ship is on special condition.’

‘First Company business,’ said Ekaddon. The tunnel space about them was still but for the quick flashes of the alert lights. Hegron and his squad had still not moved. ‘Stand down, lieutenant.’

‘You were not logged or linked into the local tactical vox,’ said Hegron, flatly. ‘What are you doing here?’

Ekaddon stepped away from the hatch, raising his hand placatingly.

‘I cannot tell you, brother, but we do not have much time, so I hope that you will forgive–’

Ekaddon drew and fired his bolt pistol. The round that punched from the barrel had twice the explosive force of a standard bolt shell, and a shaped cap of ceramite around a metal tip. When it struck, the explosion turned the metal to liquid and the sheath directed the blast and liquid forwards in a burning jet. They had not existed before the beginning of the war; they had not needed to. After all, what need for a round that had only one purpose: to kill armoured Space Marines?

The round struck Hegron on the raised lip of armour just below his neck. The detonation was a blink-flash and roar of light. Hegron’s head ripped from his body. He fell, arms thrashing, as the pressure wave slammed through his flesh.

One of Hegron’s squad opened fire.

Fast, thought Ekaddon, a shame to waste such ability. He half ducked back as a bolt-round burst on the mass of the open hatch beside him. He

fired back as the rest of his command squad opened up. They had been ready; Hegron's squad had not. Sound roared through the corridor, rising to drown out the alert sirens for a second, then vanishing to leave only echoes. Ekaddon's Reavers moved forwards, and for a moment the sound of single gunshots returned as they put rounds through the left eye of each of Hegron's squad.

'Give them the coins,' said Ekaddon, taking a circle of mirror-polished metal from a pouch on his waste and tossing it onto Hegron's gore-splattered chest. It was an old custom, older than the Legion, an honour given to the dead and a warning to the living from the murder-soaked tunnels of Cthonia.

'Captain,' Kobarak hissed, 'we should not–'

'Do it,' snarled Ekaddon. 'This is a blood war now. The least we can do is observe the formalities.' He moved back to the hatch. There was a second door beyond the first, smaller and heavier, its frame and setting thick with rust bloom. He tried to open it just to be certain, but its lock had been fused long ago.

'Cut it,' said Ekaddon. 'Fast.' One of his warriors moved past him, a lascutter keening as it lit. Molten metal began to run down the door. Rust puffed to smoke. The beat of sirens filled his ears. His mouth was dry with adrenaline. The lascutter went out. The warrior stepped back, and Ekaddon took hold of the release handle.

He hesitated.

He felt his breath hold in a dry mouth. He had not paused before killing Hegron, nor when the creature Tormageddon had come to him, but now he felt that he was about to do something that would have implications larger than anything he had done before. He was crossing a line. The future that waited beyond this door was one that he wondered if he would survive.

He let out the breath and pulled. The hatch creaked, then came free. Droplets of cooling metal fell from it as it hinged wide. Air rushed into the space beyond, tugging at the hatch before he secured it. Somewhere a system screen would be blinking amber at a servitor monitoring internal atmosphere pressure. Like the dead they left in the outside corridor, that did not matter.

Beyond the hatch, the cold dark of the Black Levels marched away out of sight. He drew his powerblade, thumb on the activation stud, and stepped through. Low-temperature warnings lit in his helmet display. Nothing

moved around him except dust and rust particles stirred up by the false wind. He had taken three steps when he felt instinct prickle the back of his neck. He whirled, blade lighting.

An armoured figure stood in the dark beside him.

‘Captain,’ rasped Maloghurst, and Ekaddon thought he could hear the twisted bastard smiling. ‘I almost thought you would not be coming.’

Layak

‘You need to return to the war, Fulgrim,’ said Lorgar. His voice was low but rolled across the throng like a pressure wave. Some of the mutants knelt. Others twitched and vomited blood. A golden halo had unfolded from Lorgar’s shoulders as his psychic force manifested in the warp-saturated air.

Fulgrim squirmed, a hand running through N’kari’s hair, while another picked a wet, red fruit from a silver platter and held it out to the bloated daemon. Layak noticed that the exalted daemon’s face was a warped echo of Fulgrim’s own, a fattened parody of the daemon primarch’s soul-breaking perfection. N’kari ate the fruit and licked Fulgrim’s fingers.

‘How long has it been, brother, since we talked? I mean, really talked, swapped stories and all those little conversational intimacies that are supposed to be the mark of fraternal bond? Too long.’ He ran his tongue over his teeth. It was very pink. ***‘Maybe… But then again maybe not…’***

‘The war–’

‘After all, we are not really brothers, are we? Any more than bacteria that spawn on the same rotten meat are siblings. It is difficult to grow emotion in a test tube, though I doubt that our father tried that hard – the balance of family life was hardly the top priority.’

Lorgar’s face remained unmoved, his eyes unblinking. Layak could feel the control washing off the primarch as the halo glowed brighter around his head.

‘You have been blessed and exalted, Fulgrim,’ he said. ‘Your nature is as the Dark Prince wills, I do not dispute that. But I am here to bring you back to the war you left incomplete.’

‘Which war is this, brother dear?’ said Fulgrim, running a finger over N’kari’s cheek. ***‘I lose track. Time is not what it was.’***

‘The war against the Emperor, the war to take back the Imperium and give it to the gods.’

‘Oh, yes… That war. I remember it. How did it end again?’

‘It did not,’ said Lorgar, though his eyes had narrowed slightly. ‘Though the end is close. That is why I am here, to call you back to it.’

‘For Horus…’ said Fulgrim, watching Lorgar out of the side of his eyes as he licked the red fruit stains from his fingers.

‘This war was never just about Horus,’ said Lorgar. ‘It is the victory of the primordial truth over our father’s lies.’

‘Lies… I was always rather fond of lies. But no matter, what you have come all this way to say is that I should come back to your pitiful age, gather the creatures that the Emperor tore from my loins, and what…?’ Fulgrim twitched a shrug, then continued in a voice that roiled and growled with false exultation. ***‘I should stand shoulder to shoulder with my beloved brother Horus, fight the fight of righteousness, see our father cast down, weep the tears of a rejected but avenged son?’*** A murmur of laughter ran through the watching crowd of monsters. ***‘That’s your job, brother dear.’***

‘You are refusing?’ said Lorgar.

‘Refusing is too strong a word. The truth…’ The daemon primarch smiled as he weighted the word. ***‘The truth is that I just don’t care.’***

‘Now you are lying,’ said Lorgar.

‘No…’ Fulgrim fixed his gaze on Lorgar’s, the smile sinking back into coldness. ***‘No, I am not.’*** Red malice bloomed in Fulgrim’s slit pupils. ***‘I am sure you don’t intend every detail of this meeting to be pathetic, Lorgar, but somehow even without that intention you have succeeded. Horus would be so displeased.’***

‘Horus…’ Lorgar said the name carefully, rolling the sound like a wave turning over a stone. ‘I am not here for Horus.’

‘You said something almost like that before,’ said Fulgrim, the sly grin hooking back into place. ***‘And I thought, that can’t be high and true Aurelian flirting with treachery. But it wasn’t just flirting, was it?’*** Delight shone in the gleam of teeth behind his grin. ***‘Do tell me more.’***

‘Horus will fail, and then everything that we have done will be ashes. Mankind will not embrace the gods. The tyranny of our father’s ignorance will continue.’

‘You want me to help you betray him. Oh, Lorgar, I didn’t think you had it in you!’ Fulgrim uncoiled himself from N’kari and slithered down the side of the dais towards Lorgar. ***‘And then what? Who will take his place? Oh…’*** Fulgrim chuckled. ***‘Brother sweet, brother mine, you mean to take the crown and sit on the throne, don’t you? You have become far***

less dull than I remember. Priest King of a realm where gods and mortals dwell in union, where ambition is righteousness, entropy sacred, excess embraced and slaughter is devotion. I can see it… I can see it, brother, the cities of gold and bone, the worlds of ash. I can hear the screams and taste the pyre smoke.' Fulgrim closed his eyes and rolled his head back, nostrils flaring as he inhaled.

'It is not for me. This is for the gods, for mankind.'

Fulgrim swayed in place and then exhaled with a sigh. He lowered his head and opened his eyes. They were a flawless, wet black.

'He died on Davin, you know? He only lives by the power of the Four,' he said. ***'If the gods abandon him he will be no more, the echo finally faded, the light that blazes in place of his soul gone.'*** Fulgrim's smile flickered and thinned***. 'Like pulling the cables out of a machine…'***

'Victory in this war is greater than any individual. It is worth anything and everything.'

'And you want me to what, return to Horus' side and then plunge the dagger in before following you to Terra?' The words still held an edge of mockery, but the tone was grave.

'Not just that, Fulgrim,' said Lorgar. 'You are at one with the divinity of the Dark Prince. You are the son of the False Emperor and brother to Horus. Where you go, the tide of your god flows.'

'Flattering… Tempting… But, as I said, I just don't care enough to join in.' His smile split wide across his face again***. 'You really are a fool. The Dark Prince does not withdraw his favour from Horus. And you think that you can lay low the Warmaster and then tame the forces loyal to him? Hubris is a delicious sin, but one that will undo you if taken to excess. Take it from me.'***

'He will fall,' said Lorgar. 'He falls already. That is why this must be done, because he is too weak to see this crusade to its end.'

'And you think that the others will bend their knee to you?'

'They will bend their knee to the gods that own their souls, and the gods have brought me this insight so that I might do their bidding. They are all the gods' children, and the gods will this.'

'You are sure of that?'

Lorgar's face twitched into a smile.

'I have faith.'

‘You will need more than that to persuade a child that this is anything but a joke without the grace of humour.’ He turned and began to slither back to the dais. ***‘I will enjoy watching what happens, though.’***

‘I am sorry, Fulgrim,’ said Lorgar, his voice calm but the halo of power around him growing like a sun rising above the horizon. ‘That choice is not one that I can allow you to make.’ The crowd shivered and hissed with fear and anger. Fulgrim was turning, the white mane of his hair rising in a sudden wind.

+Your time is now, my son.+ Lorgar’s psychic sending slotted into Layak’s mind and turned it over like a key opening a lock.

Layak took a breath. Behind his eyes, thoughts began to whirl. Fragments of memory and sensation and words began to flow together.

‘It…’ he had said to Lorgar in his sanctuary on the Trisagion. ‘The exalted creature that is your brother – it may refuse?’

‘It may, my son,’ his primarch said. ‘That is why you are coming with me, and why I must ask your forgiveness again.’

‘Forgiveness, lord?’

‘You need to bear a burden that I cannot.’

Fulgrim was still turning. Blades glinted in hands. Mouths opened in cries of delight and rage.

A void opened in Layak’s mind. Words unfolded into blackness, spreading into strings of syllables that reached past language and into eternity. It was not language, not as mortals could speak it. It was a name, a single name spoken by nightmares beyond the door of sleep. On and on it went, curling like a serpent. He felt his soul shriek, but the fragments of knowledge were bursting out from where they had been seeded inside him. Each of them was a part of the name, a slice of the worm that pushed up from the void and into his throat.

The first syllable coughed into the air in a splatter of blood. The stones of the piazza shook. Fulgrim twisted as though struck. And now time was winding slowly as the syllables sliced through the instants. The crowd howled in rage.

Lorgar’s mace was in his hand, lit with lightning. His halo was flame. A pulse of telepathic command snapped out. The guns of the Word Bearers came up, fingers on triggers. Actaea was in Lorgar’s shadow, blurred by psychic force. All of these things happened in the split second it took Fulgrim to rear up and turn. He grew as he moved, faster than a lightning

strike, body swelling with anger. The sky flashed to black. Light became blinding. Lightning cloaked his muscle, freezing into plates of armour. Curved swords manifested in his fists as they rose.

His eyes fastened on Layak, burning with fury. Layak could feel that gaze passing through his flesh and armour, stripping back the wards written on his skin and shivering through his body. The mask was glowing white-hot against his face. He felt small, an insect flying into a thunderstorm.

Fulgrim lashed forwards. The Word Bearers opened fire. The crowd charged. Lorgar leapt to block the path of his daemonic brother as Layak felt another molten, writhing sound force its way onto his tongue and the next syllable of Fulgrim's true name split the air.

Argonis

Deluge sparkled with flames. Detonations spread under the black pall, clogging the atmosphere. Equatorial forests burned from the edge of night to the dawn terminator. Millions of sap-heavy trees poured smoke into the air. Above the planet's sphere, the ruin of its defences drifted in a belt of gnawed wreckage. Warships hung low above the planet. Their guns were silent, their scarred hulls emptied onto the world beneath. Storm clouds boiled above the ruins of its cities. Dirty lightning sheeted the sky. Ash-clogged rain daubed the ruins grey. The fires of the death pits still burned, though, even under the wet lash.

Argonis had looked down into the first pit they passed. A scum floated on the surface of the burning oil and fat. The domes and faces of a few skulls poked through the liquid and fire. The air above the pits shimmered. Patterns formed in the smoke: faces, mouths, teeth. They had seen bodies in the cities, hacked apart and left where they had fallen. Only those that died with weapons in their hands went into the skull pits.

He had seen similar before, though not on this scale. On Hastrix the Warmaster-sworn forces had piled the bodies and heads of the slain under conical crusts of earth and cooked the meat off them. Raked from the ashes, the skulls had been hung from the crane gantries above the mines. It was ritual, a vile kind of honour to the enemy and an offering to the slaughter-born god of the warp.

Pieces of armour, helmets and lasguns littered the lips of the pits, slathered with soot and blood. The gleam of frogging and the marks of uniform designations flashed from the muck. They had passed ten cairns of

skulls already, each as high as a tank. He understood what was happening here. He had listened to Maloghurst enough to know why such things were done. He did not like it. It was not the slaughter that worried him; it was what it implied.

‘This is an accursed world now,’ he said aloud. ‘They have made it so.’ Perturabo said nothing but looked out as the grey rain fell to meet the rising fires.

The Iron Warriors stood on a hill that had been a building. Girders projected from the slope of rubble, chips of painted plaster still visible amongst the shattered brick. Thick rain pattered off the shells of their armour. A demi-grand company arrayed beside armour, and the hulking forms of Dreadnoughts. Vehicles and prefabricated fortifications ringed them, positioned and deployed in minutes once they had reached the hill from the landing site. That had been over three hours before. In that time, and in the ten kilometres of flattened city they had crossed, they had seen no living thing.

‘They are not coming,’ said Argonis. The air tasted of copper even through his helm filters.

‘They will,’ said Perturabo, eyes fixed on the land lurking beyond the curtains of rain.

They had seen the fires of battle from the edge of the system, sensor echoes of plasma and nuclear detonations across the spectrum. No one had challenged the *Iron Blood* or its sisters as they moved in-system. There were no picket ships, no watches waiting for enemies or friends. Just the smudges of heat from where defence platforms had exploded. The fleet had been within weapon range of the planet before the World Eaters ships had responded. There were a lot of them – thirty at least in visual range and likely more on the other side of the planet. They had moved as though in a torpor, uncoordinated, their guns ready but their sensors half shut down. The largest of them bore a name that had held a reputation even before the Shadow Crusade had marked it with scars, and the warp had set a patina of crimson on its hull. The *Conqueror* looked like a ruined queen of destruction, her finery tattered, her beauty lost to scars. She was the equal to the *Iron Blood* in size, but war had not been kind to her. Still she turned to meet the Iron Warriors like a slaughter-drunk warrior rising from her chair with sword ready.

Perturabo's ships had stopped dead on the edge of the World Eaters' weapon range. Their guns were lit, and they had painted every ship and angle with weapon plots. Ten thousand Iron Warriors waited in their launch bays, their guns filled with ammunition, their lips silent as they awaited their lord's will.

'Send it,' Perturabo had said, and the signal had reached out to the *Conqueror.*

'This is the voice of Perturabo, Lord of the Fourth Legion. I come from Horus, Warmaster of the New Imperium, with a message of his will. We come as brothers in blood and war.'

A reply had come, scratching with static from being bounced through atmosphere to a ship and then from ship to ship.

'This is no place for you,' it had said in a halting growl. *'Leave us. Go.'* Then it had cut out, and no further word had come. The World Eaters ships had not tried to stop them as the *Iron Blood* and its sisters had moved into Deluge's orbit. They had stayed close, though, approaching within hundreds of metres of the Iron Warriors, their guns primed, like wild dogs running beside a rival pack. The Iron Warriors had dropped in a single wave, five thousand warriors, armour and materiel roaring down through smoke and storm clouds to stand on a murdered world. Argonis had not asked why they went arrayed for battle. The answer was obvious: they might need to fight. On the surface they had moved and deployed with a swift efficiency that Argonis had only just been able to follow. War machines had been positioned, defence lines erected and munitions sighted without Perturabo speaking a word. It was like watching the cogs of a machine turn.

'We are here to bring them to the Warmaster, not to slaughter them,' Argonis had said. Perturabo had looked at him for a long moment.

'Words will fail here,' he said. 'You can taste that truth in the rain. Battle is the only dialogue that my brother will hear.'

Beneath the rain Argonis shook his head and was about to speak again when a hiss and scrape of metal made him turn. The hunched shape of Volk stood behind Perturabo, standing almost as tall as the primarch now. He was pointing into the distance with a hand of blades. Argonis looked in that direction. At first he saw nothing, and then his eyes found it, a shadow amidst the grey streaks and smoke. It walked closer, its movements slow but somehow awkward, as though it were forcing itself to move that slowly.

Guns rose as the figure drew closer. It kept walking. Argonis could see it more clearly now: a lone warrior in plate and helm, caked in blood and ash. More guns rattled to alert and turned to cover the warrior. No one spoke. The figure began to climb the hill of rubble then stopped just beneath the lowest palisade. He looked along the plasteel barrier, at the levelled guns of the warriors behind it, and then raised his gaze to Perturabo.

'Leave,' he said. 'You should not be here. Go now.'

Argonis recognised him then. They had met before, fought once, even – shared battle zones and command briefings, though he remembered the warrior's bearing as much as the voice. Still, he could not keep the question out of his own voice as he spoke.

'Khârn?'

The warrior's gaze twitched to Argonis, but he did not reply. Rain slid in heavy trickles down the face of his helm. His armour was gore-caked and fire-blackened, the white and blue of its colours all but lost beneath red and black. He held his chainaxe loose at his side, the flesh of his axe-arm bare. Argonis saw the hand twitch on the haft. Chains rattled. He did not look like the warrior that Argonis had known. He looked like something much more fragile, and much more dangerous. The World Eater shivered, then shook his head as though trying to clear it. 'Go,' he said again, the words rasping with effort.

'We come with the Warmaster's will,' called Argonis, the words loud but flat in the pattering rain. 'Where are your brothers? Where is your lord primarch?'

Khârn shook his head once.

'Leave,' he said. The chainaxe in his hand gunned to life for an instant. Shreds of meat scattered from the teeth.

'Your ships let us land,' said Argonis. 'We are here because the Warmaster calls you to play your part in the fall of the False Imperium. You are called to the gates of Terra.'

A slow breath hissed from Khârn's speaker-grille.

'Khârn, listen to me,' said Argonis. 'Angron must–'

'He is dying,' roared Khârn. The chainaxe spun to life, and Argonis thought he could see the effort of will vibrate through Khârn as he kept it still at his side. He was breathing hard, the sound rasping from his speaker-grille. 'This is all that is… keeping him here.' He jerked his head at the flames rising from the death pits. 'We did it for him. I did it for him.'

The display of Argonis' helm began to ping with warnings fed from the auspex systems of the Iron Warriors tanks.

There were things moving towards them behind the veil of rain and the wash of flame. Countless things, moving fast.

'They will come…' said Khârn. Every word now seemed an effort. 'If you do not leave… now, they will come.'

Perturabo turned his head slightly and nodded. The Iron Circle closed around him, shields locking. Every weapon across the hillside armed with a buzz of charge and a clatter of cycling breeches. He looked back to Khârn.

'Let them come,' he said.

Behind Khârn, the first of the World Eaters broke through the curtain of rain with a roar of fury.

Fulgrim and Lorgar clash

FOURTEEN

Ekaddon

The sirens shouted in time with the boom and roar of the ship. Ekaddon ran through the red-sliced dark. Behind him, Maloghurst limped. The rest of the squad was strung out down the passage behind them in loose battle order. That was bad; you did not just run through a ship under battle condition, especially when you had to count almost everyone on board as a potential enemy. They had no choice, though. Time and speed was everything.

‘The Blood Angels have punched through the Seventeenth Company cordon,’ said Kobarak.

‘That’s not good,’ wheezed Maloghurst. ‘There will be reinforcements flooding into these sections soon.’

Ekaddon did not reply.

‘Two hundred metres to the hoist shaft,’ said Kobarak.

‘They will have shut that down as soon as the Blood Angels breached the hull.’

‘It will be working if we can reach it within the next five minutes,’ said Ekaddon, watching the runes dance in his sight, marking their route through the ship. ‘The tech-witch guaranteed it.’

‘But not if we miss that window of time,’ said Maloghurst, an edge of humour in the rasp of his voice.

Ekaddon was about to reply when an explosion punched through the side of the corridor ahead of them. The blast wave picked him up and slammed him into the wall. Ceramite cracked. Warning runes and static filled his vision. He hit the floor, rising even before his sight cleared. Shreds of metal pinged off his armour. A figure was stepping from the torn ruin of a door. Flame light licked over the crimson of its war-plate. Jet blood marked the edge of its pauldron, and its face was a serene mask of silver. The sword in its hand shone with lightning from winged crossguard to tip. On its chest

was the winged skull that had begun to spread amongst the Legions still loyal to the Emperor. The *Pax Imperialis*, they called it, and the warrior who wore it was of the IX Legion, a son of Sanguinius, a Blood Angel.

Ekaddon brought his pistol up to fire. The Blood Angel's sword-cut split the pistol just behind the barrel. The explosion ripped Ekaddon's hand apart. Pain speared through him for an instant before his body blanked it out. He jerked back in time to avoid the Blood Angel's second cut.

So fast, so fluid, thought a part of his mind even as his power knife lit in his hand. Blood scattered from the stump of his wrist as he moved. His squad brothers were moving in the corridor behind him, but for this second he did not care. He was a commander, a warlord, but in this moment he was a son of Cthonia as much as a son of Horus. Death, swift and brutal, delivered without hesitation, that was what he had learnt in the dark warrens of the home world, and that was what had given him everything he had. It did not fail him now.

A bolt-round tore past him as one of his squad fired. The Blood Angel staggered as the shell burst in the air beside him. Ekaddon took the opening and leapt the last metre of space separating them. The Blood Angel brought his sword around in an upward cut that would have split Ekaddon from hip to collar. Would have, if it had begun a fraction of a second before. Ekaddon landed inside the Blood Angel's swing. The pommel of the sword clashed against his side. He slammed the elbow of his ruined arm into the Blood Angel's silver face, then stabbed up, knife arm pistoning. Just like the old times, when he and Argonis had walked from the tunnels with red arms to dump their death coins at their chieftain's feet.

Ceramite and bone exploded under the knife's power field. A flurry of bolter fire came from the breached door through which the Blood Angel had emerged. There were others there, other figures in red armour. Ekaddon rammed the Blood Angel back, still stabbing, blood burning to smoke on the knife's power field. Two of his squad brothers were behind him now, close in, firing over his shoulders as he ploughed forwards, shoving the dying Blood Angel into his squad mates.

'Grenades,' he called into the vox. A second later, a trio of grenades lobbed past him as he pivoted back into the corridor. The blast blew a fresh gout of flame past him. 'Withdraw!' he shouted.

He began to run, looking back to check that Maloghurst was still with them. The equerry was three paces behind him, his twisted frame turning

his run into a loping hobble.

‘We have to reach the lift-hoist in–’ began Maloghurst.

‘I know!’ growled Ekaddon. Further down the corridor red-clad warriors stepped from the smoke and flame. They fired. Another man in Ekaddon’s squad went down, his legs torn out from under him.

‘Captain,’ said Kobarak over the vox. Part of Ekaddon’s pain-soaked brain noted that the signals specialist was still alive. ‘Primary command signal traffic indicates that Lord Kibre has committed two-thirds of the Justaerin to a boarding action against the enemy star forts. They are moving to the teleportation chambers now.’

Perfect timing, thought Ekaddon. He did not know how Maloghurst and the daemon creature had engineered such fortune.

‘It will mean nothing if we can’t reach the throne room,’ said Maloghurst, as if answering his thoughts.

More gunfire came from behind them. He glanced back. The rearmost pair in the squad had dropped to one knee on either side of the passage and were firing down it in synchronised bursts. There were red warriors lying on the floor, blood lacquering their armour to a gloss shine.

The blast doors to the lift-hoist were just ten paces in front of them. Yellow-and-black chevrons marked their closed teeth. Kobarak sprinted past him to the controls. Maloghurst slowed.

‘The doors will not open,’ called Kobarak.

‘The tech-witch has betrayed us,’ snarled Ekaddon. The sensation from his arm was starting to eat through the pain suppressors in his blood.

Kobarak shook his head, fingers moving over the control keys set in a panel beside the doors. ‘Someone has overridden the hoist already. It is in motion… Someone is coming down.’

Ekaddon turned to look at Maloghurst, his mouth forming the question.

A booming thud shuddered from the passage they had come down.

Ekaddon turned from the doors. His two warriors were firing back into the Blood Angels. Something was moving beyond the flare of gunfire. The deck shook again. He felt his teeth shake in his jaws. He knew that sensation, knew it from hundreds of battlefields.

‘Dreadnought,’ he shouted.

A tongue of stuttering fire ripped down the corridor towards them. The two kneeling Reavers became tatters of bone and armour. A roar filled

Ekaddon’s ears, purring and sawing as the line of fire reached towards them.

The Dreadnought stepped through the curtain of smoke. It made no pretence of aping the human form. Its torso was a block of machinery set on piston-driven legs. Slabs of armour covered its front. Silver blood drops gleamed amongst the scorches and bullet marks. The cannon mounted on its right arm keened as it spun.

Ekaddon dived aside a second before fire spat from the cannon. Maloghurst was not as quick. A cluster of shells ripped through his left leg as he ducked back. He fell, blood scattering, as the torrent of fire panned away from him. Another of Ekaddon’s squad was caught in the open and sawn in two.

Ekaddon rolled as he struck the deck, and came up beside the hoist doors. Kobarak was beside him, not bothering to take cover but still working at the lift-hoist controls.

‘It is almost here,’ called Kobarak. ‘I cannot stop it.’

‘Just get the doors open or it won’t matter.’

The Dreadnought’s cannon fell silent. Ekaddon could hear the hiss of liquid coolant fighting to quench the still-spinning barrels. Pistons slammed its feet into the deck as it came forwards. There were Blood Angels in the passage behind it now, running up behind the cover of its bulk. The remainder of his squad opened fire. Rounds smacked into the Dreadnought’s front and burned into the space behind it.

The autoloader in its cannon arm cycled with a thud of metal on metal.

Ekaddon smiled behind his faceplate. So this was how it was going to end: not in battle in the heart of the Emperor’s domain, not with a knife from behind or a bolt shell delivered for betrayal, but here in a half-forgotten corridor. He was almost disappointed.

Beside him the doors of the lift-hoist clanked and began to open.

The Dreadnought seemed to pause, its bulk twitching as it shifted aim.

Ice prickled across Ekaddon’s skin. Figures stepped from the opening beside him. He saw armour that was the black of soot and the touch of fire. He saw frost spread across the deck beneath their feet.

Furnace light shone from their eyes and the joins in their armour. Ekaddon could feel the touch of the warp on his skin. The taste of blood filled his mouth as he looked at them. There were three of them, but their presence filled the space before the doors. They were of the Luperci, and

the daemons within their souls had risen from their hearts. Claws grew from their hands. Their helms cracked and elongated. Jaws opened across their faceplates, and heat breathed between burnt-iron fangs. At their head walked a bareheaded warrior. The lines of Grael Noctua's face were gone. A grinning skull glowed from beneath translucent skin. Twin horns rose from its brow. Tattered light coiled in its wake.

'Murder,' said Tormageddon in a voice that shivered from the back of Ekaddon's skull. The three Luperci bounded forwards.

The Dreadnought fired. Flames breathed from its cannon. Brass casings sang as they struck the deck. The Luperci were one stride into their charge, legs elongating, armour flowing like muscle. The cannon rounds hit them head on and vanished.

Ekaddon heard screams fill his skull, and for a second he thought he saw ghost impressions of faces swirling in the dark around the Luperci, jaws wide to swallow the bullets from the air. The twin-souled creatures took another step and leapt. The Dreadnought twisted to track them, its piston fist rising. Bullets tore into the passage walls. Bolter fire rose from the Blood Angels behind the Dreadnought. The Luperci landed on the front of the machine. The Dreadnought twisted, trying to throw them off as they buried talons in its armoured skin. They tore at it, worrying and rending. The red lacquer of its armour blistered and charred beneath them. Sparks and burning oil fell from its form.

Ekaddon pulled himself up, his knife still in his hand, his head filled with screams and the pain of his wounds.

Tormageddon was sliding past him towards the Dreadnought, unhurried. For a second, Ekaddon felt instinct scream at him to bury his blade in the thing's throat. Tormageddon turned its head to look at him. Fire flowed beneath the skin, and blackness filled the sockets that were its eyes.

'Maloghurst,' it said. Ekaddon's head snapped around, eyes going to where the equerry lay at the side of the passage. A black pool glistened around him, spreading wider.

The equerry had pulled himself half-upright. He was still, though, the fingers of a bloody hand splayed against the wall. Ekaddon ran to him.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tormageddon move towards the Dreadnought, gaining speed, a lightning-shot pressure wave building in front of him. The Dreadnought managed to clamp its fist around one of the

Luperci. Chisel fingers slammed together. Armour shattered. Warped flesh became slime. A shock wave of screaming light flashed out.

Ekaddon reached Maloghurst and dropped to his knee. He put a hand on the equerry's shoulder.

'Maloghurst!' he shouted. There was no response. He pulled Maloghurst's helm off. The face beneath was pale, the eyes closed. A fresh stream of blood ran down the equerry's chin from the corner of his mouth.

'Maloghurst, you old bastard, this is not the time to die.'

A high shriek filled the corridor. Ekaddon looked around in time to see Tormageddon reach the Dreadnought. Its hands were bunches of glowing blades. The air around it was a vortex of red-smeared light. The two Luperci leapt from the machine's casing just before Tormageddon struck. The Dreadnought was torn and dented but still swung its fist at this new enemy. Tormageddon met the swing with a twitch. An invisible wave slammed into the Dreadnought. The fist juddered as though pushing through rock.

'Kalus…' The whisper reached up to Ekaddon, and his gaze snapped back to Maloghurst. Eyelids fluttered open over pale eyes. 'Get me up, Kalus. Get me to the throne room.' For a second Ekaddon did not move. Perhaps it was the sound of his given name coming from the equerry's mouth, perhaps it was the effort and control in the plea, but he felt something he did not understand.

'Get up then,' he growled, and looped an arm under Maloghurst's shoulder. Fresh blood poured out of the torn stump of Maloghurst's left leg. There were wounds in his lower belly too, raw punctures through ceramite and meat. A mortal would already be dead, would have been dead from the first impacts, in fact. A Space Marine too. But Maloghurst gurgled bloody foam from his mouth and tensed to take his weight on his remaining foot.

Tough, thought Ekaddon. *Tougher than I would have imagined.*

'Cthonia does not breed those that die easily, does it?' Maloghurst rasped, as though replying to Ekaddon's thoughts.

'Shut up and move,' said Ekaddon. He began to make towards the hoist doors. Red smeared and dribbled in Maloghurst's wake.

Light flashed behind them, and Ekaddon glanced back. He saw the fist ripped free of the Dreadnought's sarcophagus. Amnion and blood sprayed out. The machine's limbs spasmed, pistons locking and firing in time with the last impulses of a dying mind. The Luperci were amongst the Blood

Angels now, lit by muzzle flash, talons and teeth dragging smoke as they descended.

Tormageddon pivoted towards them from above the carcass of the Dreadnought.

'Go,' it said. ***'We shall follow.'***

'I should have…' hissed Maloghurst, the words stretching and slurring as the pain pulled them apart.

Ekaddon pulled them onto the hoist platform. Four of his squad came with him, firing back into the whirl of fire and blood in the corridor. Kobarak was one of the four, Ekaddon noticed.

'On Cthonia… I should have left you and your brother in the dark…' slurred Maloghurst. The blood on his lips was a clotted froth. 'When you tried to take my eye… A gutter discharge with a knife. I should have broken your neck.'

'Then you would have no one to drag your carcass across this ship,' snarled Ekaddon and slammed the hoist into motion.

Layak

'He is a blessed creature now,' Lorgar had said. 'He is one with the Prince of Chaos, his essence intertwined with the divine.'

Layak listened, and felt the implications unfold in his mind. They almost took his breath away. 'You mean to learn his true name…' he said. 'You mean to know the name by which Fulgrim can be bound.'

'He is what the unenlightened would call a daemon. His being is now part of the geometry of the divine. The Prince of Pleasure has made him an angel of the highest dominion. Such power is beyond all but the mightiest of the Neverborn, but with that power comes all the laws that govern the creatures of the gods.'

'To learn his name though…'

'That I have already,' Lorgar said, and behind him the doors to Layak's sanctuary opened. Thirty-six slaves shuffled into the chamber, chains of silver and cold iron clinking from ankles, wrists and necks. Stigmata covered their flesh, curving in sinuous patterns. They giggled and wept as they moved. 'It is here, broken into pieces, held in the thoughts of these blessed souls.'

'But to hold the complete name… Such a name has power. It will hollow out the soul of those who speak it. And if a being knowing his name were to

come close to Fulgrim, he would sense it. He would know it.'

'That is why it must be you, my son.'

Fulgrim came forwards. Wings unfolded from the air behind his shoulders. He grew as he moved, a blur of colour and edges. Behind him N'kari began to rear off the dais, flesh rippling, its face a mask of delighted rage.

They would not survive long. Even without the transcendent power of Fulgrim, they were facing a city, a world. They would die here, and their souls would be taken and spun on looms of agony for eternity. The only way for them to survive was for him to speak the name that was tearing its way out of his mind. Lorgar had known that, he realised. That is why he had only brought a small force. He had lulled Fulgrim into vulnerability. He had misdirected his daemon brother's attention by hiding his true weapon behind the shield of Layak's mask, and in the void within his soul. And it had worked, but there was still time for the sword bearer to die before the blow fell.

Gunfire spat from the Word Bearers. Explosions tore into Fulgrim's flesh. Blood scattered into the air, burning to indigo smoke. Telekinetic force whipped out, plucked three Word Bearers from their feet and crushed them like overripe fruit. The invisible force lashed into the next warrior and met a dome of golden light. A blinding flash stripped the air of colour. Lorgar stepped forwards, his sceptre at his side, his hand raised. Fulgrim leapt into the air with a snap of his coils, psychic force shrieking around him, curved swords a blurred halo as they swept down to strike. Lorgar raised his sceptre, and shadows unfolded from him, spreading his shape across the ground and air. Fulgrim's swords swept down, and the shadows rose to meet them.

Layak's sight went black as more segments of the true name clawed into the air. He was sweating blood. Shivering. Screaming with a choking throat.

You wanted the power of gods, said a spiteful voice in his mind. *Now taste its truth*.

No, came another voice, rising from the void where the true name had coiled in his soul. *I never wanted anything of false gods. I–*

He felt his knees fold and the staff fall from his fingers. He could hear the roar of voices and the howling of reality.

His sight blinked back into focus. Fulgrim was spinning around and above Lorgar, sliding between air and ground, mocking gravity as he cut

and cut. Lorgar was moving backwards. His sceptre was a blur around him. Thunderbolts flashed where the weapons met, but even with Lorgar's posthuman speed, he would have been overwhelmed if it had been a matter of arms alone. The air between them writhed with shadows and shrieking light. Sword blows vanished into folds of light. Splinters of psychic ice fell from bursts of fire.

N'kari was oozing forwards now, its psychic bow-wake pulling the surrounding throng with it in a howling rush. Layak saw a clutch of silk-wound humans come too close to the storm around Fulgrim and Lorgar. Their souls ripped from their bodies and spun howling into the air, trailing crimson light. Their corpses dropped and became pulp under the hooves and feet of those behind them. Towering bull-headed creatures with oiled muscle bellowed as they braced cannons with fluted barrels. Cones of deafening noise roared from the cannons as rounds ripped from their barrels. Two Word Bearers fell, ceramite tearing under the screaming deluge.

'I will not end here,' shouted Actaea. She was standing tall now, face raised and defiant. Her psychic presence suddenly flared, burning, incandescent. Layak's sight dimmed at the brightness. Figures fell in the oncoming throng, their eyes boiling in their skulls. 'It is not written,' she was calling. 'I will not end here.'

Another link in the infernal chain of Fulgrim's daemonic name snapped into sound.

Fulgrim flinched as he twisted and reared. Lorgar struck. Perfumed blood and pearlescent scales tore away as the spiked sceptre smashed through armour.

Layak's sight was dimming, his will to keep speaking a fraying rope that he could not hold on to.

Spring-legged men bounded forwards sweeping bladed limbs, grinning with flayed faces. One of them punched a scythe-tipped arm through the neck of a warrior as it flipped past the thinning cordon of Word Bearers. It landed a pace from Layak. He was still kneeling, still frozen as the unholy name regurgitated from his mind. A spring-legged man looked down at him with indigo-and-green eyes. Its arms swept back. It raised a foot to take a pace forwards and snapped its razor-limbs down.

A scream of shearing metal.

A blur, shadow and movement congealing into form.

A second scream. Flesh dissolving into ashes.

Kulnar stood above him. The blade slave had drawn his sword. Pulled with its twin from the desiccated corpse of an alien on a world of thirst and desolation, the sword laughed as it scattered blood from its edge. Kulnar's armour cracked as he grew. Red embers and grey ashes poured from the glowing splits. His sword hand had fused with the weapon's pommel. Charred flesh burst through the armour of his arm. The sword was growing, grinning with black iron teeth, sucking in light as it twisted. Hebek stepped next to his brother. Spines punched through ceramite. Soot scattered from him as he moved. The marble cracked under his tread.

Even driven by the will of N'kari, the throng faltered before the pair. Then the wave broke. Kulnar and Hebek met the charge. Bodies tore apart, meat charring as it fell. A bull-headed giant bellowed and struck Hebek with a hooked axe. Hebek took the blow on his shoulder, the hook biting into flesh and broken armour. The bull-headed creature bellowed in triumph and yanked back with all its weight. Hebek buried his blade in the beast's chest, and its bellow of triumph became a cry of terror. Layak had seen it happen before. The first thing he had learned about the cursed swords was that they were thirsty. The beastman crumpled, muscle and flesh sucked inwards, crumbling and withering. Hebek lifted the creature off its feet, still impaled, as the blade ate its life.

Cries sliced through the surrounding horde. Even over the roar of the true name filling his mind and ears, Layak could hear them and understand them.

'Anakatis!' came the cry, echoing in the warp and reality alike. 'Anakatis! Anakatis!' The hunger, the promise of the pit. Even here, in the heart of the Eye of Terror, they remembered the swords and what they had killed.

Layak vomited a stream of sounds. Fulgrim fell back, shivering, shrinking, and Lorgar was pressing his attack, hammering his brother back and down. Layak could feel the last syllable of the name sitting in the depths of his soul like a red-hot coal. It was so close that he could taste it. It tasted of honey and raw meat. He could not do it, though.

Grey armour, he could see grey armour, and feel the heat of a pyre as the creeds of false gods poured into the night sky on tongues of flame.

We burn the past to make the future, said a thought. Pain spiralled in its wake. Echoes and images clung to his mind like a bruise.

He felt the last syllable rise to his mouth. The vision of battle snapped back into motion. Sheets of light were scything through the air, and the throng of bodies was a bloody wave rolling into the gunfire and blades of the last few at Lorgar's side. Fulgrim reared from the ground, swords in hand, bloody wings a hood behind his head. Blood glossed the crimson of Lorgar's armour. His eyes were sunken in his face. He turned, dragging the head of his mace behind him like a comet pulling its tail of flame through the night sky. Fulgrim met the blow with crossed swords, but the force of it cannoned him backwards. Blood, so dark that it was almost purple, streaked the ground.

N'kari bellowed. Until now Fulgrim's consort had left the demigods to their fight, but now it came across the bloody ground in a blur. The exalted daemon had sloughed off its previous shape. Coils of thick flesh lay on the ground in folds. Its pudgy mockery of Fulgrim's face was gone. Whipcord muscle and deathly white skin sheathed long limbs. Fleshy horns curled above a snarl of glass-shard teeth. Light bent and shattered around it, lashing at eyes that tried to look.

Lorgar straightened to meet the exalted daemon, hand raised as though in piecemeal greeting.

Fulgrim stirred at his feet, bloody, blades and wings rising.

Layak spoke the last syllable of the name.

Argonis

The slaughter tide was white-streaked red. Ashen water and blood scattered from the charging warriors as they ran up the slope of the hill. They came from every direction, screaming with battle joy, rattling with skulls and chains – not an army but a wave driven by shared hunger. Argonis could see other shapes amongst the World Eaters, spindle-limbed creatures that ghosted and steamed in the grey downpour, canine shapes that shook with gore-matted fur and brass scales. An ache filled his skull as he looked at them. Gunfire spat from the edge of the oncoming tide. Bolt-rounds exploded against palisades. Grenades lobbed through the air, bursting amongst the tiers of Iron Warriors. A spear of plasma burned above Argonis' head and tore an arm from one of the Iron Circle in a flash of sun-bright light. It was nothing, though, a wild scattering of shots, unaided and undisciplined.

The Iron Warriors held their fire for an instant and then opened up as one. Rounds and energy blasts sawed through the air, first a handful and then a growing cascade to rival the falling rain. This was no volley fire. Each shot had been chosen and placed. Argonis watched as the shots tore at the creatures running beside the World Eaters. He saw a beast of brass and fire rear as a beam of plasma cored its skull and sent molten metal scattering into the rain. Some World Eaters fell. A lascannon blast reached for a jackal-headed daemon, but the creature jerked forwards an instant before it hit, and the arc of light bored through three warriors with a puff of atomised matter. Dying daemons dragged down warriors as they dissolved out of being. Stray rounds found unintended targets. But for the Iron Warriors this was not about killing; it was about stealing strength from the tide as it engulfed them. The first World Eaters were at the bottom of the rise. The Iron Warriors' fire ceased.

'Now!' called Perturabo, and explosions stole the sound from the air. The earth between the World Eaters and the first line of Iron Warriors rose in a wall. It seemed to hang for a second, the sound going on as it loomed above. Then it crashed down again, pouring earth and ash back onto the ripped ground beneath. The nearest World Eaters vanished as the momentum of their charge carried them into the pit that had opened before them. Argonis could hear the roars of rage as they fought to rise under the falling debris. Others were caught at the edge of the blast and tumbled upwards, rag toys of meat and shards. The tide swept on, driven by fury, blind to anything but the song of the nails in their skulls and the promise of bodies falling beneath their blades. The ground dropped beneath their feet. Loose earth fell with the rain.

'Second configuration,' said Perturabo, his voice clear over the echo and roar. The Iron Warriors on the hill slope began to move. Squads with high shields moved forwards as the temporary palisades were pulled into new positions. Tanks drove into place, their hulls forming walls beside steel barriers and rows of interlocked shields. Thousands of warriors, fortifications and machines had redeployed in seconds. As the first World Eaters came out of the pits blown by the mine charges, they met not a wall but open corridors of shields and palisades leading further up the slope. Some ran at the palisades and shield walls. Only a warrior who dreamed of his own death would make such a charge. Armies had died across the ages of humanity when gripped by such battle madness. But they were blessed of

the god of blood and war, and they lived only for the certainty of death and the song of slaughter.

Argonis felt the charge hit home, shuddering, vibrating through ground and air. And the line held. The Iron Warriors still did not fire; the will of their lord held their guns silent. To most forces that would have been suicide, but these warriors had been fighting on ammunition-starved battlefronts for years. They met the slaughter tide with blunt iron and muscle. Shield squads surged forwards an instant before the World Eaters struck, ramming thick plasteel forwards with genhanced strength. Power weapons lashed sparks from the shields. Iron Warriors fell, but the shield walls closed, and iron fists and maces battered back at the tide.

A berserker – chain-wrapped and screaming through the grin of a skull helm – leapt at a palisade wall. His axe hooked over the top, and he hauled himself up. An Iron Warrior swung a hammer down at the berserker, two-handed, the head cold metal. The World Eater raised a chain-wreathed hand to meet the blow. Ceramite and bone shattered. The World Eater bellowed and flung out his shattered arm. The chains hanging from his forearm arced up, tangling the Iron Warrior's hammer head as it rose for another blow. The berserker yanked down. The Iron Warrior behind the wall jerked forwards, still gripping his hammer. Still hanging from the palisade, the World Eater rammed his helm into the Iron Warrior's faceplate. Shards of crystal scattered from shattered eyepieces. The Iron Warrior was trying to recover as the berserker pulled himself over the palisade and hacked his axe into the back of the struggling warrior's neck. Blood blushed the rain-streaked air. The World Eater raised his axe to the sky, and the roar of the tide behind him rolled like thunder.

Argonis watched Perturabo as the primarch saw his sons fall, and their blood began to mix with the mud. The rain was getting heavier, the drops black as they fell and crimson as they splashed.

'Third configuration,' said Perturabo into the vox. The Iron Warriors moved again, pulling back, switching position and surging into gaps in the World Eaters lines, with tanks and shield-bearing squads. Wide channels now opened in their formation, unfolding before the sons of Angron even as they charged. Sections of the Iron Warriors had pushed out and down the hill so that they were deeper in the horde than before. Seen from above, the progression of the battle would have seemed like a flower unfolding its petals as it drowned.

The World Eaters poured in. The Iron Warriors held them back still, withstanding the fury of the XII Legion's assault. The armour of all those on the hill of rubble was red-slicked and ash-clogged now. And still the World Eaters came charging up the hill to break against the metal of the maze of shields, tanks and walls. Argonis saw a palisade give way under the weight of blows, saw the Iron Warriors behind it bludgeoned down and hacked apart. He saw a metal gauntlet rise from amongst the butchers, grasping, fingers flexing in air. A chainsword churned it into a bloody stump. All across the hill the lines drawn by Perturabo's warriors were bowing, folding, creaking under the pressure of blind fury.

'We cannot stand much longer,' said Forrix. 'Give the order to fire, my lord.'

Perturabo gave a single shake of his head.

'He is coming,' he said.

'How can you know?' asked Argonis.

Perturabo did not reply. Argonis looked up as the sky above flashed. Whips of lightning spiderwebbed across the sky. A cry of rage rose through the air to greet the thunder, and then another and another, the ragged war cries fusing together into a single sound. The clouds swelled and billowed, red folding with black, flame-yellow with grey.

'The…' The word came from behind Argonis, and he turned to see that Volk had raised his head to the sky. Thick rain was running down the steel of his face. The chrome of his eyes burned with reflected lightning. And his mouth was open. The voice that came from it growled with the clack of closing breeches and charging weapons. ***'The… Red Angel cometh.'***

A shadow moved across the ceiling of the sky, a darkness beyond the clouds, black amongst the colours of fire. The World Eaters' shouts were a single rolling voice now as they hacked and battered at the Iron Warriors. The shadow in the sky grew. Perturabo did not look up. Argonis realised that the primarch's eyes were closed.

The clouds split, spiralling, pulling the cords of lightning into ropes as they reached towards the summit of the hill. A shape fell with the cyclone. Wings spread from its shoulders, ragged skin taut in the gale. Brass armour coated a body of gore-slicked muscle. A mane of cables streamed from behind a head of flayed muscle and charred bone. Argonis looked at it and felt his nerves scream at him to run. His head was a ball of agony. Neon light streaked his vision. The reek of hot metal and hacked meat flooded his

mouth as vomit rose from his throat. He could not feel his hands hanging loosely at his sides, fingers slack on forgotten weapons. Across the hillside, eyes rose and the flow of battle stuttered.

Perturabo opened his eyes. Weapon pods armed. Plates of metal unfolded from his frame, layering deflecting edges over thick armour. A plough-fronted helm clamped into place over his face. The Iron Circle stepped close around him, shields locked, dead machine eyes bright. Volk was at his side, almost the size of the primarch, his eyes now fires in the mask of his face. Perturabo looked up. And above him the angel of slaughter that had once been a primarch fell back to earth.

‘Fourth configuration,’ said Perturabo calmly.

FIFTEEN

Maloghurst

Light and dark, dark and light sliced by the passing seconds. Light… Dark… Light…

‘Mal?’

He must have fallen unconscious on the tunnel floor. He remembered blood. A lot of blood.

‘This is a death wound,’ he said, raising a red hand in front of his eyes. The shadows of the tunnel shifted and swam before him. The hair of his topknot hung lank down the back of his neck, matted and sticky. Where was he? Had he got back from Gerag’s territory? Had he taken a wrong turn? He did not recognise the tunnel and could see no markings on the wall. Metal scraped on rock nearby, and he twisted his head around, eyes reaching for the sound.

‘Mal. Ullanor, Mal. I must–’

Gunfire pulled him from the dream of pain into the reality.

Ekaddon was half lifting, half dragging him across the deck, firing his pistol as he moved. Banners hung in the dark above him, tatters of past wars hung in shadow. A blaze of bolter fire reached for them from the darkness. He could see warriors in black armour, and beyond them – set against the fire-laced sheet of night – a throne.

The throne…

And a figure on the throne, head bowed, wrapped in shadow.

‘Mal…’

Light strobed beyond the viewport, blinking back the brilliance of the war in the void beyond.

Ekaddon dropped and dragged Maloghurst behind a pillar. He ejected and replaced the clip of his bolt pistol.

How had he got here? The question drifted across the rolling sea of Maloghurst's mind, but then sank out of sight. It did not matter. There was always a way.

'Mal…'

There was no need for blood this time, he realised. There was blood enough on the deck already.

Blood…

There was blood on the throne, blood pouring from the side of the figure who sat on it.

Maloghurst opened his mouth. Iron breath hissed over his tongue.

'Sire…' he gasped.

The rotor blink of gunfire, and a cry rising through the throne room, and red on the steps before the shadowed throne, and…

His hand was red as he raised it. His topknot hung lank against his neck, clotted with gore. He blinked away the dream of fire and iron and the blood-marked throne. A dream… Yes… A death dream. He felt laughter come to his lips, and the movement sent a fresh wash of blood down his side from the wound beneath his ribs.

'Death wound…' he whispered, and tilted his head back to rest against the wall behind him. It would end here, down this tunnel that he didn't even recognise. He thought of all the scheming, all the throats he had opened to try to make himself something greater, and in the end it had been a blow from a scared whelp he had not even seen until it was too late. That was a fitting punishment, he supposed. He had tried to create something greater than himself, not just rule over this tunnel or that, not just gather the oaths of warbands and gangs – those were the small things, the petty things that had been attempted before. They passed. They were no greater than the vanity and the desperation of cruel men. No, his dream was of something greater still. A kingdom. A kingdom that would stretch from the deepest tunnel to the furthest minehead, a place that could pull itself up from the filth and blood. Now it would remain a dream.

'You can have it,' said a voice. He looked up. A figure towered above him, the burning promethium that lit the tunnel staining its pale armour red. ***'You can be part of something greater than this life and suffering.'***

He blinked, feeling his vision swim as it tried to touch the face looking down at him.

'No…' he said. 'It did not happen like that. Horus was not there.'

‘No, he wasn’t,’ said the figure***. ‘It was Qruze who found you in the tunnels, wasn’t it? He found you and thought that the youth who dreamed of being a king would make a Space Marine.’*** Amarok stepped closer and the impression of Horus drained back from Iacton Qruze’s features. He was armoured now, face lined and weathered by years. ***‘You wanted to be a king, but always stayed a step behind your masters. So much power, but here you are…’*** The daemon dipped a finger in the blood pooling beside Maloghurst. ***‘Dying of a new wound while dreaming of an old one to try to save a creature that is not and never was human.’***

Maloghurst grinned with the memory of bloody teeth.

‘You would not understand,’ he said. The daemon showed its teeth. ‘Horus…’ said Maloghurst. ‘Take me to Horus.’

‘Which one? He is scattered and dying, his essence pulled across existence. I can show you a part, but your Warmaster is…’

‘Ullanor,’ said Maloghurst, knowing the answer even as it came to his lips. ‘Take me to Ullanor.’

Amarok seemed to let out a long breath and then nodded. It turned and began to walk. The tunnel pulled apart around it, motes of colour caught in a tumble of wind. Maloghurst found himself standing, no longer the young Cthonian warlord he had been but clad in armour, his frame just as twisted as it now was. He limped after the daemon as the world blew past him. The dust swirled before his eyes, the image of Iacton Qruze the only thing he could see.

‘Why do you serve him?’ asked the daemon. ***‘You could have taken this opportunity for yourself. You could have left him to die, and his war to fail, and made yourself a greater warlord than any could dream.’***

Maloghurst opened his mouth to spit a reply but found a cold burst of laughter on his tongue.

‘Because he is my lord. Because if we are not striving for something greater than us then what are we striving for at all? Because… because he is my friend.’

Amarok did not reply but walked on in silence for several steps.

‘Stay close,’ it said. ***‘We are almost there.’***

The swirl of dust began to change colour. Red streaked the grey. Maloghurst felt the sting of sun on his skin. The smell of thruster fuel and burnt rock filled his nose.

And then the sand and dust were gone, and he was walking beneath the dome of night across a plateau of beaten earth and stone.

Campfires glimmered in the dark, throwing flame light across the flanks of landing craft and war machines. Starships crossed the sky, brighter than the stars. Snatches of conversation and laughter came to him on the wind, but distant. The great highway that stretched before him waited in silence, and rising at its vanishing point was the Imperial Dais, carved from the bones of the mountain that it had replaced.

Amarok faced him, waiting.

'He is here?' asked Maloghurst. 'Truly?'

'This is Ullanor,' said the daemon. ***'This is where he always is in his heart.'*** It turned and nodded towards the distant dais. ***'You have to walk the rest alone. I cannot go with you.'***

Maloghurst took a step then looked at the daemon. It looked less like Iacton now, its face sharper, the hollows of shadow deeper. The wind gusted past him. The outline of Amarok was blurring, the edges dissolving into billowing dust.

'Goodbye,' it said. The wind rose again, and on it Maloghurst thought he heard voices that he knew: Loken, Torgaddon, Sejanus. Then the air was still and the dark was empty where the daemon had been.

Maloghurst began to walk along the highway. He knew it. He remembered it. Ullanor on the eve of the triumph. On the eve of everything that would come after. Now he was here, he did not need to seek Horus. He knew where his lord would be. He walked, limping, the taste of fire and dust in his mouth. Time passed in slow seconds, and with every step the feeling that this was no warp dream but reality made again, grew stronger. The dais rose above him in increments until it was a mountain of statues, steps and pale stone made grey by night. He reached the base, found the flight of stairs beneath an arch and began to climb. He passed a Custodian walking one of the landings. The gold-plated giant looked at him and moved on without a word. He kept climbing until the stairs ended. A balcony spread from the door at its top. Its white marble seemed like carved snow. He stepped to the balustrade and looked down. The parade highway and the lights of the camps lay beneath him, a black sea still at the base of this island.

'Sire,' he said softly, without looking around.

'Mal?'

‘Yes, sire,’ he said. He was still looking out at the black distance.

‘I knew you would come.’

‘Did you, sire?’

The wind filled the pause.

‘No.’

‘You need to come back,’ said Maloghurst. Silence answered him. ‘The war, the Legion, everything you have set into motion – it is coming apart. The dream is dying.’

‘I know.’

‘And yet you do nothing,’ said Maloghurst. He felt the tiredness in the words. By all the oaths he had ever made, he was tired. ‘You do nothing.’

‘I am fighting, Mal. I must win.’

‘Fighting…’ He shook his head, eyes closing. For a second the gunfire-streaked gloom of the throne room on the *Vengeful Spirit* filled the blackness behind his eyelids. The main doors had been opened. Black figures were advancing. The flares of bolt-rounds were bars of fire stretching between guns and targets. The Luperci were running into the fire, their images blurred silhouettes.

Maloghurst opened his eyes. The night of Ullanor was there again, calm and still.

‘You are not fighting,’ he said, and turned. Horus stood next to him. His armour was white and bore none of the marks or the heraldry that it had taken in the thirteen years that separated that night with the present. ‘You are losing, sire.’

Layak

The final syllable rang across the space like the note of a struck bell, rising in pitch and volume. Layak’s throat burned and cracked. Wounds opened on his skin inside his armour. Time and substance slowed and expanded. And on the sound went. The mutants and human slave throng fell to the ground. Bowels and stomachs voided. Some were dead before the breath of their last cry left their lungs. Others lay bleeding and weeping as the blood and excrement soaked into the tatters of silk and velvet. Stillness flowed out through the palace city. Wounds opened in the sky above. Blood fell.

Fulgrim hung in the air, pinned in place like a moth in a display case. His body had shrunk to that of a fine-limbed youth, his white hair spilling around his head as he gasped for air. Burning marks covered his skin,

weeping black pus as they tried to close. Layak could not look at them even though they were the echo of the word he had just spoken. The air had gone still. The only sounds were the hum of the remaining Word Bearers' armour and the hiss of blood cooking on Kulnar and Hebek's blades.

Lorgar turned his face to the bleeding heavens and closed his eyes. Layak knelt behind him, flanked by his blade slaves. The red rain sizzled as it struck the pair's armour. Layak forced himself to begin to stand. He could feel Fulgrim's mind and will battering against his own, but it was as though they were separated by a wall, and the cries and blows were weak and distant. He felt hollow, as though he were a shell skin around a void.

Hollow man, the phrase sounded in his memory and he looked to where Actaea stood, shivering, bloody tears marking her face. She seemed to sense his gaze and turned her face towards him, then turned away.

The daemon N'kari had halted in its charge a pace from Lorgar. It stood quivering, red steam venting from its nostrils, its whole body flexing as though straining against a chain that held it in place.

'Be calm, O wrathful angel,' Lorgar Aurelian said.

N'kari hissed, teeth wide, six-pronged tongue snapping in the air.

'You will suffer for this, priest. I am the keeper of your soul's secrets, of your unborn dreams. I will tear them from–'

'No,' said Lorgar. 'You will not. I serve the gods. If the Dark Prince wished this otherwise then it would not have happened so.'

N'Kari's muscles bloated, its head elongating into something that looked like a bull with a wolf's smile.

It laughed then, the sound hooting and rumbling as the thick rain fell into the quiet.

Lorgar turned his back on the daemon and looked at Fulgrim.

'You are a beautiful thing, brother,' said Lorgar. He raised his hand and brushed the back of a bloody gauntlet down Fulgrim's cheek. 'So blessed, so radiant…' Fulgrim's eyes were burning with loathing. Lorgar gazed back at him, his face emotionless. 'But to be even the most favoured instrument of a god is to do its will and to aid its purposes. You are beautiful and terrible, but you are an instrument now, brother, nothing more.'

Lorgar looked at Layak.

'Let him speak,' he said.

Fulgrim snarled as soon as Layak willed him speech.

'I will take your soul and–'

‘Your consort has already issued the necessary threats. I do not expect you to like this, brother. You were always too bound up in the ideal of yourself to see that you have to submit to greater powers and greater goals. You will hate me for this. You will loathe me with all the spite of your immortalised being.’ Fulgrim’s eyes flashed. Lorgar held his gaze, face as calm as still water. ‘You will hate me, but you will obey, and that is enough.’

Lorgar turned away and knelt, putting his fingers to the bloody ground and then touching them to his eyelids and forehead, chin, cheeks and temples.

‘We shall leave this place. You shall gather your Legion and bring it to Ullanor, where Horus calls his muster. We shall go to him and strike him down.’

Fulgrim began to shake his head. Lorgar’s hand snapped out and closed shut on Fulgrim’s jaw. The white flesh burned under the grip.

‘That is what will happen, because you are now a slave, Fulgrim, and the gods have put your chain in my hand.’ The fingers bit deeper. Muscles formed and bunched beneath the skin on Fulgrim’s spread arms. ‘I take no pleasure in this power, brother. You are a sacred thing now, and I regret that this is necessary, but do not think that I will abstain from any means to see this crusade end.’ He looked into Fulgrim’s eyes for a long moment and then slowly, tenderly, planted a kiss on the daemon’s forehead. Then he turned and moved to where Layak stood.

‘Thank you, my son,’ he said. ‘There was never another as devoted as you.’ Layak bowed his head, but in his mind he thought he heard laughter at the back of his thoughts.

Son… son…

Devoted… devoted…

He had the sudden feeling that the mask was grinning at him from its inside surface. Grinning where no one could see it.

‘Give him the power to act but not the power to disobey,’ said Lorgar.

Layak raised his head, his mind forming the web of will and command that spoke across the bonds linking him to Fulgrim. The daemon primarch arched and roared, fists and muscles balling. He shook himself, wings now six pinions of perfect white feathers. Pearlescent armour sheathed him.

N’kari walked to Fulgrim’s side, its bull-headed form shrinking and thinning until it was a slender figure wrapped in red silk, its skin the colour

of a shark's belly, its eyes black orbs. A delicate crest of bone and skin ran down the centre of its scalp.

'Where the Prince of the Princes goes, so go I,' it said, its voice a melody that promised bliss and suffering. ***'I am bound to this and to him. As you command him, so shall I follow your will. I shall raise no hand against you, nor shall I seek to break the bonds you have placed.'***

The daemon's throat bulged. Hebek stepped forwards, the hungering blade fused to him twitching. N'kari did not move, though, but coughed, seeming to choke for a second before vomiting something onto the ground. It was wrapped in thick, black fluid but rang hard as it hit the stones. Lorgar picked it up, smearing the black scum from its surface. It was a tooth, long and needle-tipped, its substance black and glassy. Light winked from its surface, each flash a different colour. Layak found that his first instinct was to look away, and then that he did not want to look away. He knew what it was, had even possessed some, though never one from such an exalted creature as N'kari. It was a token, a bargain given physical form. For some creatures such a token might be a rusted shard of a sword, a splinter of bone, a perfect pearl. Whomsoever possessed the black tooth could summon N'kari to their side, command it, and would not be directly harmed by the creature. Not the total control of a binding, but a bond given physical form. A debt marker from the Sea of Souls.

Lorgar nodded and handed the black tooth to Layak.

'So be it,' he said and looked to Fulgrim. 'Your Legion must be gathered.'

Fulgrim stared at him, contempt burning in the gaze. Then he shook his hair out and tilted his head back. His throat rippled. Wet red gills opened. Pouches of skin inflated. Fulgrim called into the abyss. It had no true sound, but reality blurred and vibrated as its silent note rose. Actaea flinched, head twitching as blood ran from her ears. The blade slaves growled, the teeth of their swords grinding. Layak heard it in his mind, echoing across his link with the daemon. It was a command, a call to gather like the cry of a wolf to its pack. Sensations and images came with it, fragments of nightmares and joy: the taste of a fruit picked just as it ripened, the gasp of someone dying in strangled terror, the warmth of flesh against the razor's edge.

Out the call went, piercing time and space. It vibrated through the gene-laced blood of Fulgrim's bastard sons. On his throne Eidolon heard it, and blood flooded the whites of his eyes. In the sound-drowned ruins of Nus,

Glorocletian, Apex of the Crescendio, heard the cry over the sounds of shattering stone and the screams of the dying. On Netis' black sands, Lucius looked up from the scattered limbs on the ground beneath his sword. The faces on his armour swirled and echoed the call. In a thousand places of suffering, the children of the Emperor heard and raised themselves from the pleasure of their slaughter. They rose with bitterness in their hearts, with joy, with apathy, but rise they did. Ships broke from the orbits of mutilated worlds. Scattered fleets came about as they rode the frayed remnants of the Ruinstorm. From across the burning Imperium, the Emperor's Children heeded the demand, and the promise, of their primarch.

'You will have such pleasures. I will give you such things…'

Fulgrim lowered his head and looked from Layak to Lorgar.

'Done,' he said with an acid smile. ***'So, shall we go?'***

Inside his head, Layak felt a laugh echo in the abyss of his soul.

Argonis

Angron struck the summit of the hill as the Iron Warriors scattered. Steam poured into the air as the mud flashed to dust and then to glass. The daemon primarch rose, his movement a blur, the roar from his mouth shuddering through Argonis' flesh.

He had asked Perturabo about this moment, about how he would deal with the creature that his brother had become.

'As all conquest begins – with his weakness,' Perturabo had replied, and had given no further answer. On the summit of the hill, with the fire-wind of Angron's presence beating against his body and mind, Argonis could see no weakness in what the primarch had become. Perturabo stood inside the ring of his Iron Circle. The hammer *Forgebreaker* hung in his left hand, its head alight with cold lightning. The automata had turned so that their shields faced in, forming a circle around the two primarchs.

Beyond them, down the flanks of the hill, the walls of the Iron Warriors formation had driven through the World Eaters. Volleys of bolt-rounds had ripped holes in the tide of howling legionaries. Tanks had ploughed through them, crushing bodies. Shieldbearers had followed in their wake, forming new lines of blood-streaked plasteel. It was no longer a defence. It was a strangling. Channelled even as they killed, the World Eaters were now cut into pockets, contained. It would not hold, though.

'This is madness,' shouted Argonis.

‘It was always madness, Voice of Horus,’ said Forrix, the words edged with a cold chuckle. ‘Now it is just visible madness.’

On the hilltop, Angron reared to charge at Perturabo.

‘Fire,’ said Perturabo.

The Iron Circle obeyed. Fist-sized rounds tore into the daemon primarch. Explosions shattered against brass armour. Chunks of flesh and blood tore free, foaming into black ectoplasm as they fell. More units began to fire. Angron roared, his wings snapping wide as missiles and las-blasts tore them to tatters. The volume of fire was blinding, a lattice of angry light against the storm clouds. Angron came forwards, muscles pushing his form against the fire. Ichor drooled from gaping wounds, smoke and ashes shook from him. His flesh was remaking itself even as it was torn from him, swelling him so that he loomed above the crest of the hill, shivering with rage, radiating pain.

For an instant Argonis thought that the creature would fall. Then he seemed to shrink. Wounds closed. Armour glowed white and flowed into bullet holes. A high ringing noise filled Argonis’ head, blotting out the sound of gunfire and the roll of thunder. He could feel nothing else, just the pain boring into the meat of his soul and burning down his nerves, and he knew that it would go on forever unless he stood, unless he poured it into the world as rage and let it coat his hands red.

The deluge of fire intensified, but Angron had taken a step forwards, and the blasts and shots were vanishing into the shadow of his shape. The daemon that had been a primarch charged.

Space folded as he moved. Features dissolved in a blur. His wings were slices of fast-moving shadow, his strides a flicker. The storm dragged after him. Lightning arced down, spearing through warriors and war machines. A tank exploded, its ammunition and fuel cooking off and punching its turret up into the air. A cluster of World Eaters became ash as power arced through them. Blood cooked and rose in charring globules. Argonis watched, unable to move, unable to turn his mind to action. This was not simply a creature of destruction; it was a force of annihilation that was not meant to share the same realm as mortals.

He saw an axe form in Angron’s hand. Its edge was a slit of sharpened light. Reality tore as it cut. Smoke bled from the wound left behind its edge.

Perturabo was a statue of metal standing in the shadow of death. The axe cut. Perturabo moved aside. Even layered in armour and pistons, he was

still faster than Argonis could dream, fast enough to almost avoid the blow. But nothing that was even half-mortal could have avoided that cut. The axe struck his shoulder. White light blazed. For a second he could only see white, and then the neon scar burned onto the back of his eyes. He heard more blows fall, each one screaming louder than gunfire.

In the pit of his soul, he thought of all of the duties he had done Horus in the hope of clawing back the feeling of brotherhood that had been everything but was now just a memory. This would not just be failure. This would be death. He would end here, another heap of butchered meat on a world that was a graveyard of bones in a galaxy they had set ablaze. It all ended here: redemption, brotherhood and the lie of a higher purpose.

His sight cleared.

Perturabo still stood. Impossibly, the Lord of Iron stood.

Glowing scars marked the plates of his armour. Blood hissed as it ran over orange iron.

But he stood, and *Forgebreaker* was rising in his grasp, its head a comet as it swung.

Angron did not move to avoid the blow. He was swinging again, roaring, blood-slicked cables lashing around his head. Like all the other blows he had struck in the last second, it was faster than the eye that saw it. But Perturabo had timed his blow and slid it into the split-second gap as Angron swung back to strike again. The hammer struck. Forged by Fulgrim for the brother he had murdered, then given by Horus to Perturabo, it was a weapon that transcended even the craft put into its making.

The hammer head hit Angron’s chest. Brass armour shattered. The shock wave ripped outwards. Argonis felt it pass through him. Angron staggered.

Perturabo stepped forwards, the hammer swinging back in a blurred sheet of lighting.

Angron rammed forwards before Perturabo could strike, and now it was Perturabo going back, armour blackening as furnace-flame breathed from Angron’s teeth. The axe struck again and again, blows that could end Titans falling. Fresh wounds opened in Perturabo’s armour. But still he stood.

‘You think I am weak,’ Perturabo’s voice boomed from the grille of his helm. Angron struck him twice again. Splinters of metal fell from the Lord of Iron as he staggered once more. ‘But you have grown weaker, Angron.’ The daemon primarch lashed a kick into Perturabo and struck once, twice, three times as the Lord of Iron stumbled back and crashed to his knees. ‘I

have learnt. I have remade my strength. While you have sold yours out of despair.'

Argonis heard the words, heard the spite in them, the cold bitterness. There was something else there, too, something that made Argonis think of the knife duels in the dark warrens of Cthonia – cuts meant to goad, not kill.

Angron roared, and in the fraction of time that gave, Perturabo was on his feet, *Forgebreaker* moving faster than before. The air shook as its head struck and struck again, and there was blood on the baked mud of the ground beneath the two. Angron was scattering burning blood and broken armour. He lashed a fist at Perturabo. Claws tore the front from the Lord of Iron's helm. Perturabo's skin was pale grey streaked with blood beneath.

'You are weak,' snarled Perturabo. 'You are a slave. You were born a slave and a slave you remain.'

Angron cut Perturabo.

Argonis did not see it done, just the Lord of Iron suddenly still, a crimson trail running down his chest and glowing gashes smiling across his torso. Angron was striking again, but somehow he seemed to be shrinking, the edges of his shadow-and-flame bulk retreating like a wave from the shore. Perturabo struck back, and hammer and axe met.

'Your strength flees,' roared Perturabo. 'It does not belong to you. It is your master's, and the chain that keeps you throttles you. The threads of blood are thinning. The meal of slaughter will only keep you here long enough to see your bastard sons die.'

Beside Argonis, Forrix heard the words and keyed a control on his vox. Rounds began to hammer into the divided World Eaters. It had only been seconds since the Iron Warriors formation had entered its last configuration, and now Argonis saw that its weakness to further attack up the hill was a simple trade-off: vulnerability sold to allow for slaughter. In a few more minutes the World Eaters would have broken out of their corral, Argonis had no doubt, but they would not have that chance. Mortars thumped explosives into the kettled XII Legion. Cannons roared in overlapping sweeps. World Eaters fell, torn apart, their fury no more than bloody mist coughed from shredding lungs.

Angron turned towards the circle of automata surrounding them. His axe lashed out, burning gouges across the front of the circle of shields, again and again scoring deep.

‘Their skin is my skin,’ called Perturabo. ‘A gift of suffering at the hands of our brother.’ He was walking towards Angron, limping but hammer in hand. ‘You think that I would let your kind wield your weapons against me? I have taken their measure.’ Angron whirled, wings extending to carry him back at his brother. Perturabo raised his hands, weapon pods unfolding from his armoured shell. Angron’s tattered shadow wings beat.

Perturabo fired.

Streams of energy and exotic rounds blazed across the space between the two. Fire and explosions wreathed Angron. Ectoplasmic smoke billowed off him. His wings were broken frames of bone draped with scraps of skin. Perturabo came forwards as he kept up the fusillade, each step a slow thud of braced pistons.

‘They will die, here on this hill. They will die without striking a blow. All your best mongrel sons of slaughter. They will die, and your battered soul will watch as it sinks back into the dark.’

Angron was an outline now, a thing of threads remaking itself even as it was unravelled into smoke.

Argonis heard a sudden fizz of signal distortion in his ear. Forrix stiffened beside him.

‘What is happening?’

Forrix did not answer, but turned to a bulbous-helmed signals officer at his side. Argonis was about to demand an answer when a movement pulled his sight back to the hilltop.

Volk stepped from between the Iron Circle. His body was skinned in gunmetal. He was taller again, bulked to the size of a Dreadnought by recoil pistons and tangled ammo-feeds. Muzzles and focusing arrays pushed from his arms and shoulders. Cables sprouted from his skin, and then plunged back into his body. His skull-face had sunk into the mass of his shoulders, mirror eyes fixed on Angron.

The daemon primarch twitched, as though sensing the presence of a threat or rival. Volk fired. Pistons and sinew snapped as they swallowed the recoil. Beams of energy and blizzards of rounds tore into Angron. The noise was overwhelming, the roar of every battlefield in history blended together into a symphony. Argonis knew the sound, though he had never heard it like this. It had surrounded him all his life in fragments: the buzz of cooking air, the thump of cannons and the chatter of pistols. It was the sound of the tools of war but undivided, concentrated. Whole.

Angron was pushed backwards. Holes were punched and burned through him. He was a light, illuminated by a river of gunfire and explosions. Flakes of ash boiled from his torn flesh. And Volk kept firing. Shell casings littered the ground at his feet, each of them glittering for seconds before collapsing into ectoplasm.

Perturabo gestured. The gunfire ceased across the hillside. Volk stopped an instant later. The guns projecting from his flesh sunk and regrew in different places. Argonis remembered his old friend's words on the slope of the mountain fortress.

'The end was only a dream, and what do dreams matter?'

Angron turned back to Perturabo. His rage roiling off his remaining presence, he took a step forwards, but he was becoming slower and weaker, his wings dragging on the ground, his skin splitting as his muscles bunched in his shoulders.

'You are… a… betrayer,' said Angron, his voice the hiss of quenched flame.

And then Perturabo stepped forwards and swung his hammer once. Angron fell. The baked ground split beneath his fall. Argonis saw him writhe, his shape and substance a flicker-blur of features: a noble-faced warrior, a muscled monster with the head of a hound and a collar of brass, a towering shadow of red flame and corpse-smoke. There was no complete image to grasp, just the echo of pain and rage filling Argonis' head as the broken creature clawed towards the Lord of Iron.

Perturabo stood still. Blood and oil ran from his armour. A network of gouges and splits ran across it. Gears and servos shrieked as he shifted weight. His hammer was loose in his hand. He was a ruin. But he still stood, looking down at his once brother.

'Coward…'

Argonis thought he saw Perturabo open his mouth to reply, but nothing came from the bloody lips.

Volk moved towards them, pistons bracing, releasing and reforming with each step. He stopped, and the weapons grown from his limbs reconfigured again. Heat was bleeding off him, shimmering in the air around his form. A white-orange glow seeped from the joins in his armour, as though a furnace were building heat within him. Fire began to gather in the mouths of the guns.

‘Do you wish this to end?’ said a voice that came from Volk but was the voice of the daemon in the pit of Sarum. Perturabo looked at Volk, and then back to the withering shape of Angron***. ‘It can end,’*** said the voice, and Argonis could not tell whether it was talking to Perturabo or Angron, or whether it was a question or a promise.

A quiet had fallen over the hill. The storm clouds had flattened to a sullen silence. Even the fury of the World Eaters as they beat against the Iron Warriors lines abated, as though the sea of their rage drew down the shore.

‘It can end,’ said Volk again. ***‘Not in dissolution, not in a return to the realm of pain, but in obliteration.***’ Volk looked at Perturabo. ***‘The sword lies in your hand, Lord of Iron.’***

Argonis kept his eyes on the thing on the ground.

Angron was a withered creature under the gaze of the guns, a fire-blackened gargoyle. Black slime was dripping from him. His mane of cables hung lank over his shoulders. Dissolving flesh hung from the spurs of his wings.

‘Coward…’ Angron’s head turned. A blood-blister eye fastened on Volk from beneath a lid of charred skin.

Argonis’ gaze was locked. He did not know what he was seeing: a god of war made small, pain in eyes of hate. He did not know how he wanted the next moments to unfold.

‘We have to move,’ said Forrix. Argonis blinked. ‘We have to move now.’ The First Captain was shoving through the ranks of warriors towards the Iron Circle and Perturabo. ‘Lord!’ he called, but Perturabo did not move or look away from Angron and Volk. Forrix reached his side. Argonis shook himself and suddenly heard the signals flashing across the vox.

‘What is the will of iron?’ said Volk in the dry-flame voice of the daemon. ***‘Does he end or endure?***’ Perturabo still did not answer.

‘Lord,’ said Forrix, daring to step between Perturabo and the withered Angron. Perturabo’s gaze moved from Angron to his First Captain. ‘A hostile fleet is approaching,’ said Forrix. ‘Crusade displacement at the least. Full battle array.’

‘Guilliman,’ said Perturabo.

Forrix nodded.

A low growling sound creaked through the air. At first Argonis did not know what it was, then he saw that what remained of Angron’s mouth had

cracked into something that might have been a smile, if a cooked dog could smile.

‘You have danced too long on the shoreline,’ said Angron. His voice held no anger, no rage. It was empty, the voice of wind-borne dust burying a battlefield so that no one would remember it had existed. Perturabo stepped forwards, but the last of Angron’s substance was fading, its edges losing substance, the ache of his presence in the world fading. ***‘All is sand… red sand under our feet. Now the tide comes in.’***

From across and beyond the hillside, the howl of the World Eaters chainaxes rose, spluttering and revving as they struck sparks from the Iron Warriors’ walls. Argonis felt himself remembering the sound of dust-jackals calling across the plateaus of Terra. It was not the sound of a challenge or the promise of death. It was laughter.

Perturabo was looking up. Above them the storm clouds were clearing from a night sky blinking with the false stars of warships.

‘We can clear the system before the Ultramarines reach the planet if we pull back into orbit now,’ said Forrix. ‘What is your will, lord?’

Perturabo faces the wrath of Angron

PART THREE
THE EVE OF ALL THAT MUST BE

SIXTEEN

Maloghurst

The night air of Ullanor stirred Horus' cloak at his back. The flapping of the fabric filled the silence. Maloghurst could smell the fuel of the landing craft mixing with the rock dust. It felt almost real, almost like it had on the eve of the triumph all those years before. Almost.

'Ullanor…' said Maloghurst. 'You told us to gather at Ullanor, and here we are in your fever dreams – always Ullanor. Why, sire?'

'I think you can guess, Mal.'

'Because this is where you became Warmaster.'

Horus shook his head and turned away, resting his hands on the balustrade. He looked down at the dark beneath which the parade highway ran. The muscles around his eyes twitched.

'Because this was the last time I saw my father – the last time I was a son and a brother. The last time I was not the Warmaster. I had a choice then. Maybe the only time I was given a choice not to become what I am.'

Maloghurst drew a breath that tasted real.

'He made His choice too, sire,' he said softly. 'The Emperor chose to deceive, to keep the truth to Himself, to abandon us once we were no longer the angels His heaven needed. What choice did you have?'

'Choices are everything – history is made by choices…' Horus smiled as he spoke. 'Just not the ones we think.'

'You will face Him. You will slay Him, and you will remake the Imperium. That is the future you chose for yourself. For all of us.'

'They lied, Mal,' said Horus softly.

'The Emperor–'

'The Emperor, Malcador, Erebus, the gods, all of them and more.' He paused. 'And I ate the lies. In the face of one lie revealed, I just turned to another and followed that lie until it led me in a circle.'

‘You went beyond, sire. On Molech, you became–’

‘That is the trouble with power. The more of it you have, the more using it becomes everything. A thousand steps, Mal, ten times ten thousand steps taken from past to present. Each one taken so that the next would follow, but without ever looking back. Without ever looking at whence you came.’

Horus turned from the view, and whether it had been hidden before or whether it only existed now, Maloghurst saw the blood that covered the Warmaster’s white armour. Horus’ eyes were hollow, fixed on something beyond what could be seen. His right hand was clamped over a wide wound in his side. Deep crimson pulsed between his fingers.

‘It was the wound, I think,’ said Horus. ‘Russ’ bite. I felt it sink deep. I saw his face as the blow landed. In that moment, just for a moment, everything fell away. I could see, Mal. I could see… everything. I could see so much that blindness is all that it has left me. There is no future for our Legion but shame – no honour to be given, because I burned it in this war. No matter what my father did, no matter what lies He told us, I am the hand of my own fate, and I always have been.’

On the edge of the horizon the sun began to rise. The wind was growing stronger. Banners snapped on their poles. Maloghurst thought he felt the ground shake. He could smell fire and ash.

‘I have thrown it to the flames, Mal.’ Horus’ face was a mask of pain over a pit of rage. His image blurred as he spoke. ‘There is nothing but ruin left of the dream, and nothing but ashes left of hope. And *I* have done this. I have wielded the storm and sown the future with corpses. And I can hear *them*…’ He raised his hand from the wound at his side. It was red. ‘And they are laughing.’

‘So you fight the powers of the warp as well as your father.’

‘I defied one tyrant who would be a god,’ said Horus. His teeth were clenched, between bloody lips. Behind him the sun was roaring, a burning orb hoisted into a sky that was blinding white. ‘I will not be the slave of false gods!’

Maloghurst felt the wind tug at him. He looked down at his hands. Ash and embers peeled from them. The stone of the balcony was unravelling into smoke.

‘It is too late, sire,’ he called. Far away he could feel the slow beats of his hearts as they poured his life away faster than his flesh could heal. ‘You cannot do this,’ he shouted. ‘You know that. You know it better than I. This

part of you is killing the rest of what you are. You must submit. If you do not then you will be nothing.’

‘I am the Warmaster. I will not be a–’

‘Slave? But you said you made a choice, sire, that all that has happened is by your hand. Tell me what in your slavery let you do such things?’

‘I–’

‘You made your choice, sire. You must submit to it! You must be the Warmaster, no matter the cost. I will not let you be anything less.’

Maloghurst drew the knife. It was not real. It, like everything he saw, was just a shape given to something that only the soul understood. He felt the weight of the knife in his hand, felt the cold of its edge as it touched the false air. At the foot of the throne, a world away, his hearts stopped.

The image of Horus opened his blood-filled mouth to speak.

Maloghurst rammed the knife into the open wound in Horus’ side. The image of Horus froze. Maloghurst felt the fire crawling through him, felt the talons pull the last echo of his soul into the great ocean of fire. Horus looked at him with hollow eyes, blood pouring from his lips as flames crawled over his face and the wind began to scatter them both to ash.

‘Lupercal is no more,’ rasped Maloghurst with the last of his life. ‘Horus rises.’

Layak

Layak sat alone and stared at his mask. It sat on its plinth, the ruby eyes running down its cheeks staring back at him. Its fangs grinned mirthlessly. Silence wrapped them both. The *Trisagion* was running the storm tide’s edge, its engines at full burn, daemons running before it as its heralds. They needed to reach Ullanor before Horus declared the muster complete. So Lorgar and the Legion’s priests had poured blood and prayers into the Sea of Souls, and called the children of the gods to give them swift passage. The ships of the Emperor’s Children had found them, one by one, as they rode the warp, drawn by the beacon of Fulgrim’s call. It should have been impossible for ships to locate each other in the warp, but if the gods willed it then anything was possible.

If the gods willed it…

And what did they will?

The mask grinned back in silence.

‘You spoke before, but why not now?’

He shook his head, breaking his vigil for the first time in four hours. The chamber was dark, his blind slaves banished from his presence. Only Kulnar and Hebek remained, flanking the doors, silent, swathed in red. He had come here leaving the rest of the Word Bearers to their sacrifices and grand rituals.

They had reached Orcus, rot and black fog spreading through the webway in their wake. Nothing had tried to stop them. It was as though the alien tunnels had been cut off and left to wither like a diseased limb. That journey had passed without words, just the pull of Fulgrim's bindings tugging Layak's will and the turn of his thoughts. The memory of the ghost image that had attacked him during their first journey rose and walked with him, grey clad, trailing ashes as it walked at his side. It was not real, it never had been real, but what it had said to him had been true. Layak knew that with a certainty. He remembered the truth.

'I learnt the signs of poisoned knowledge,' said his thoughts. *'I saw the masks that mankind pulls over its fears. I learnt that all gods are lies, that power comes from purity. I was there when Terra still smouldered with war and disunity. I walked the aisles of burning temples and lit the fires of condemned cities. I served the Emperor, and I walked the same battlefields as Him. I saw Him, radiant and righteous, and knew that He was the truth and the light – no god but a power beyond gods, real and terrible and true.'*

So many pyres. So many ashes…

'Why do you shiver, mighty sorcerer? What could make your soul turn to ice? The flames of truth would once have been my gift to you. But you are a creature, a slave to darkness and deserve no such pity, as you should remember…

The grey warrior smiled in Layak's memory, the expression cold and fleeting.

'I was a Herald of Truth before Lorgar came from the dust-world of Colchis. It was decades before I saw the primarch. I had been fighting among the Halo Stars, in the grand and hungering abyss of that lost expanse. Even then I did not see the poison of faith that had seeped into our Legion. That came later. The highest and purest enemies of delusion fallen to belief in phantasms.'

'What is the truth?' he said aloud.

'Revelation cannot be demanded,' said Actaea from behind him.

The muscles along his back twitched, but he did not rise nor break his gaze from the mask.

‘How did you get in here?’ he asked, feeling the threads of his thoughts ravel back into the dark.

‘I walked,’ she said, and he heard the soft tread of her feet on the deck as she drew nearer. ‘Kulnar, Hebek and I have an understanding.’

‘You should die for such a transgression,’ he said, hearing the lack of conviction in his voice.

‘Then kill me.’

She came closer, the rustle of red velvet filling his ears. He suppressed an instinct to reach for the mask, to hide his face and thoughts.

‘Spare yourself the effort,’ said Actaea, coming into view. ‘I am blind, remember?’ Her crimson robes were clean of blood, and she had pulled the heavy cowl up so that only her mouth and chin showed. She was smiling, the lips pressed into an enigmatic line.

She looked down at him and then at the mask. Slowly she stepped towards it and raised a hand as though to feel its shape.

‘Don’t,’ said Layak. Her hand stopped and then folded back into her robe.

‘My faith is false,’ he said. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Do you believe in the gods?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Do you believe that only under the gods can mankind survive?’

‘Yes,’ he nodded.

‘Then that is true.’

He was silent for a second.

‘I never chose that belief,’ he said at last. ‘They did not convert me, they did not persuade me or show me the light. They hacked out what I was, who I was. They took the belief that I had and tore it from me. I was no convert who saw the light, I was an apostate.’

Actaea raised her chin, tilted her head and then nodded.

‘They made you, gave you a name, gave you faith and ultimately power. Then they took the memory of what you had been before. The old godless iconoclast was left in the ashes of the fire that you walked from reborn.’ She shook her head twice slowly. ‘All a long time ago.’

‘Does time change anything?’

‘Everything,’ she replied.

Layak felt the ship tremble beneath him as it cut through a cord of warp current. He did not reply.

‘Lorgar has placed sentries outside your chamber, you know,’ said Actaea after a moment.

He nodded, then realised that the gesture was pointless.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I am a weapon. I have performed one of the tasks that he intended me for. I hold the shackles of an exalted prince of the pantheon. One does not leave such a thing unguarded.’

‘If you have accepted that then why do you ask the gods for guidance?’

‘I was denied the truth. I was used,’ he said. ‘And I… I can feel it… eating me. All I can hear now are echoes. The echoes of who I was, the echoes of the Prince of Pleasure’s being. Those are the only two things left to me – the warrior who believed that gods were an abomination, and the laughter of an immortal.’

‘That is the consequence of what you are and what has been done to you, Zardu Layak. Your faith is a creation, your purpose as an instrument of your master. In time you will remember less and less – the past will be eaten by the power of the creatures you have chained. That is an inescapable fate… But now, for a brief moment, you are left with one thing that means that you are not a slave. You have a choice.’

He stared at the mask for a long moment.

‘I do not wish to be a slave, but I do not see any choice,’ he said, then turned his head to look at Actaea.

The space behind him was empty. Still air and half-dark extended away to where Hebek and Kulnar stood unmoving beside the sealed door.

Argonis

The Ultramarines fleet unfolded through the void as it came. It had exited the warp in tight order, each ship slotted close to its sisters so that the whole seemed a narrow spear reaching from nowhere into the dark. Ships that were out of place moved swiftly back into position as they entered real space. And they did not slow down. Engines breathing blue-and-yellow flame in their wake, they thrust towards Deluge. Layer by layer the ships peeled out from the narrow formation, like the petals of a flower opening under the sun. Void shields crackled over ash-grey hulls and gilded gun towers. Warships of the Five Hundred Worlds rode with them: the *Vengeance Eternal,* renamed and remade from the wreck of the *Bellicosia*

left drifting in the orbits of Calth; the *Aesoclus*, war galleon of the Indumabia Free Cohorts; and the flotilla of the Casandra Belt Princes. Soldiers and machines of war filled their hulls, and fire the breeches of their guns.

Perturabo's fleet locked closer into orbit. In their bellies, lexmechanics and cohorts of servitors began to calculate firing patterns. Beside them, the ships of the World Eaters drifted in scattered formations.

The first shot reached across the void between the two fleets. It was a nova shell cluster, loosed from the cannon-barge *Seneca*. Made in times long before the rise of the Emperor, she was a weapon of a lost age, her power dwindling as the means to repair and maintain her faded from knowledge. These battles of vengeance would be her last. The cluster of three macro rounds struck the World Eaters cruiser *Red Hound*. Each nova shell in the cluster was the size of a hab-block, each packed with plasma and explosives. The first detonation ripped the *Red Hound*'s hull open and burned the air in its outer decks. The next set of warheads bored through the open wounds in its hull before exploding in its heart. The blast of the ship's reactor combined with the shell's payload set a second sun burning in the sky above Deluge.

Argonis flinched as the flare of light reached his eyes an instant before his helm display dimmed to compensate, the tactical data from the fleet swallowed by the destruction wrought in orbit. His sight cleared, and he saw that the withered shadow of Angron was smiling a broken smile from where he lay on the ground at Perturabo's feet.

'You will die here,' said Angron as another flare of light split the dome of the sky above. ***'You will die with us.'***

'No we will not,' said Perturabo. 'I refuse to let that come into being.' He turned the torn face of his helm to the sky. 'I refuse!' he called. Argonis had never heard the Lord of Iron shout. The cries of other primarchs had echoed across the battlefields he had fought over, but Perturabo was a warrior of cold slaughter, his anger the silent fall of an axe. But now, he roared. There was rage in that cry, and bitterness, and defiance.

The war-light in orbit was a stuttering corona now as the Ultramarines hurled shots at the Iron Warriors.

'This is how it ends,' said Angron, rising from the ground. Red fire flowed under his cracked skin. Withered limbs shuddered with swelling

muscle. The wings at his back creaked as smoke sketched skin between the charred bones. ***‘This is how it must end.’***

The World Eaters were streaming away from the hill now, bellowing at the sky, axes raised to the spreading wash of flame as the fleets closed.

‘The fleet needs to reconfigure,’ shouted Forrix. ‘They are approaching range to launch a ground assault wave. If we are going to resist that or evacuate, we need to act now.’

Perturabo looked at Forrix and then Argonis and then Volk. A stillness had fallen across the top of the hill, as though a circle had been drawn across which the clamour of shouts and war could not cross.

Angron was on his feet, grown again to a looming figure of red flesh and ragged darkness. He shook where he stood, etheric muscles clenching, rage fuming from him in waves. He did not move, an inhuman moment of control holding him in place as he raised his axe and pointed it at Perturabo.

‘You cannot outrun this,’ he said, the words chewed from the furnace of his mouth, his voice red fire between burning teeth. ***‘Here we will all run red, your blood and mine. Under the flesh, every face is a skull.’***

Perturabo was not looking at Angron but at Volk, at the bloated walking weapon that had been his loyal son.

‘Angron,’ he said, his voice low. Angron seemed to flinch, but Perturabo turned and raised his hammer, not in threat or challenge but in salute. ‘I speak to the warrior who was my brother in life. You cannot die. You are cursed to the eternal. You may stand here and watch your sons and mine fall, but you will not be released. You will never be released. Not if a river of blood flows.’

‘It matters not, so long as it flows!’ roared Angron. There was a heartbeat in time, a moment between the stillness of Angron and the blur of movement. Argonis could not see it, but he felt it like a breath being snatched from behind his teeth.

‘You have a choice,’ said Perturabo into the moment. Angron froze. ‘I shall stand with you, Angron. We were only brothers by blood, but here and now, I shall stand with you if you choose. We shall fight, and I shall fall as you wished to fall before our father denied you the death you craved.’

Perturabo stepped forwards.

‘It is the last choice you will have, Angron – the last choice you may ever have. You can condemn me, my sons and yours to die here, or you can come with me and face our father.’

Angron’s stillness was absolute. His bulk was a statue, the roiling dark and rage around him quiet. Argonis found that his eyes were locked on the daemon primarch, fixed on an embodiment of endless violence, motionless. Blood itched at the edges of his eyes, and in his stomach the memories of emotions taken from him long ago flared. That stillness was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

Above them the light of battle strobed across the stars.

‘I put my life and the lives of my warriors in your hands, brother,’ said Perturabo.

SEVENTEEN

Ekaddon

An arc of lightning struck the floor in front of Ekaddon. Blackness swallowed his sight for a second. He ducked aside on instinct. A bolt-round exploded where he had been. Shrapnel rang on his armour. He surged to his feet. The air was thick in his lungs, burning his skin inside his armour. Voices filled his ears, screaming, laughing, gurgling, overlapping. The sounds of battle seemed far off for an instant. Then his sight returned, as though a cloth had been pulled from his face. Light boiled through the throne room. Muzzle flare sliced through the darkness. Sheets of actinic light flashed. He saw a Luperci launch itself at one of the Justaerin, jaws split wide, talons extended. The black-clad Terminator fired at the daemon-kin. A spear of fire ripped through the Luperci the instant before it struck. Burning ichor and bone blasted out. It landed. The edges of its talons were white with heat as they sliced through the black armour. Bloody smoke caught the strobing glare of gunfire as the pair fell, locked together.

And on the scene went, half-daemons and warriors in black running to murder each other beneath the closed eyes of their primarch. Maloghurst lay at Horus' feet, a hand raised to rest on his master's foot. The maw-wound had opened in the Warmaster's side. Blood covered the steps beneath them, draining from Warmaster and equerry alike. Fire and the flash of void shields curtained the view through the crystal window behind them.

Ekaddon froze as his gaze touched Horus. His substance was thin, like an image projected into smoke, flickering in and out of being.

A powerblade flashed at the edge of his sight, and he twisted in time to step back from a descending axe. Two Justaerin were closing on him, hacking heavy, killing blows as he stepped back. He fired the last three rounds into the Terminators, aiming into their central mass, hoping to

stagger them. They did not pause, and he found himself pushed back to the foot of the bloody throne.

‘Traitor,’ called one of the Justaerin. ‘Defiler!’

Ekaddon parried a blow with the flat of his own axe, and felt force rip through his arm as the power fields of the two weapons met. The snarls of chainblades and Luperci rose against the laughter seeping into his thoughts.

The doors at the far end of the chamber began to open. Lines of fire poured through the widening crack. Ekaddon could see warriors in storm-green with bronze faceplates charging in the van of more Terminators in coal-black.

The Justaerin facing Ekaddon sensed the moment of distraction and lashed a blow at his head. He twitched aside and cut back, but the Justaerin stepped into the blow. Shards of black ceramite exploded out as Ekaddon’s axe sheared through the edge of a shoulder guard. The Justaerin rammed his weight forwards. Ekaddon felt his chest plate crack under the impact, pain shooting through him as he fell back against the steps to the throne. The image of the bleeding primarch looked down on him with sightless eyes, a cadaver where a king of conquest had once sat. Maloghurst’s face was a hand reach away, his eyes open but staring at nothing, seeing nothing.

‘You have the right idea, boy,’ he had growled as he broke Ekaddon’s knife hand, long ago in the dark of Cthonia’s underworld. The splintered tip of Ekaddon’s knife projected from the bone just under Maloghurst’s eye. Blood rolled down his cheek. ‘You will do,’ he laughed. ‘You will do.’

Ekaddon tried to rise, but a boot crashed into his chest. More pain. He looked up at the face of Falkus Kibre as he aimed his bolter.

‘Traitor,’ growled the Widowmaker. His armour was battle-damaged and still held the frost sheen of teleport residue. At his shoulder stood Horus Aximand, eyes cold fire in his skin-mask face.

The twin circles of the gun barrels filled Ekaddon’s gaze. He was aware that the wash of battle-sound had quietened. He grinned up at the barrels and waited for them to swallow him.

A wall of force slammed the Justaerin commander back. The air shimmered with ghost-light as Tormageddon slid into view. Arcs of cold fire ran over his armour. Ekaddon started to rise.

‘Leave him,’ said the daemonhost, the word a dry rattle pulled from unused vocal cords.

Ekaddon pushed himself up. Kibre raised his bolter to fire at Tormageddon.

+No.+

The word hammered into Ekaddon. His muscles froze.

Gunfire ceased. Noise vanished.

+No, my sons,+ said the voice again. Ekaddon felt his head turn. Frost was blooming over the iron of the throne. The air swam with heat. High, distant screams filled Ekaddon's skull.

The Warmaster opened his eyes. Furnace fire burned beneath the lids. He stood. Shards of frozen blood fell from him like scattered rubies. The maw in his side was closed, the armour flawless. Ghost images of wailing faces danced and spun around him, and the shadows of cadaverous hands brushed his armour as he stepped down from the dais. His form blurred in Ekaddon's eyes, colour, light and shadow flickering like the image from a damaged pict-feed. He could not breathe, and he could not look away.

+My sons,+ spoke Horus, his voice echoing in Ekaddon's skull, obliterating the voice of his own thoughts. +You have doubted, and you have feared…+

Every figure in the room knelt as Horus stepped between Ekaddon, Kibre and Aximand. The great warlords were on their knees, pressing themselves down into the cold metal, as though held by the hands of heaven. Even Tormageddon had shrunk, its horned head bowed, as though it were a dog under the gaze of a great wolf.

+But now all doubt and fear die,+ spoke Horus. The words in Ekaddon's mind blurred into the air, rolling with the sound as the Warmaster stood above them. 'All shall burn…' he said aloud, raising Kibre up with a claw under his chin. The Widowmaker was shaking.

'All shall be conquered.' Horus turned and looked down at Aximand. There were red tears falling from Little Horus' eyes. 'And all shall kneel.'

He walked between the abased warriors and grovelling daemonbreed.

Ekaddon felt as though his head would explode, as though his muscles would crumble to dust. He wanted to run. He wanted to plead for mercy. He wanted to murder, and laugh, and live, and see his star ascend in a golden age that was yet to come.

'Rise, my sons,' said Horus.

Ekaddon stood. Pain and damage drained away from him. All the others stood as one, their eyes locked on Horus, who turned and looked at the

rippling void-light beyond the great viewport. His eyes were cold and black now, mirrors to the battle beyond.

‘We end this now,’ he said. ‘And then we go to Ullanor.’ Ekaddon thought he saw the shadow of a smile on the face. ‘My brothers wait for me. And then a reckoning waits for all of us.’

Horus strode towards the doors, lightning already wreathing his taloned hand. The Sons of Horus followed him, and a choir of the damned sang in his wake.

Argonis

The *Conqueror* was the first to turn. The World Eaters flagship accelerated to meet the Ultramarines. Macro fire danced off its shields. Then its sisters followed roaring in its wake to meet their enemy head on. Two died in as many seconds as coordinated fire ripped through already-damaged hulls. The battle-barge *Victory’s Monument* turned to meet the wild charge, pulling an octet of destroyers with it. The *Conqueror* lashed fire at it in response, battering its shields like a warrior goading an enemy to come closer.

Above the arc of Deluge, Perturabo’s Grand Fleet held steady in tight formation, thrusters firing as they maintained their station. The first long-burn torpedoes began to explode amongst them. Plasma sub-munitions burst against hulls in spheres of sun-fire. The Iron Warriors fired in turn, gridding the dark with short-range munitions to swallow the oncoming ordnance.

The Ultramarines fleet began to spread wider, flattening into a disc that pressed the World Eaters and Iron Warriors between it and the system’s core. At the thick centre of the disc rode the fleet’s heaviest guns. Watching the tactical output expand across his helmet display, Argonis found himself thinking of the pit fights of the World Eaters, of the fighters who would cast a net to snare their opponents before driving a trident into their chest. Around him gunships were lifting into the sky. Slab-sided bulk carriers swallowed blocks of World Eaters. Daemons snarled at their backs, their cries growing weaker as their bodies dissolved into the mud. Above them circled Angron. The rage rolling off him peeled red streaks through the air.

‘In,’ growled Forrix, pulling at his shoulder, and then they were running for the ramp of a Stormbird as its engines rose to a scream pitch. It began to lift before the ramp closed behind him.

‘Recommended fleet distribution for breaching the enemy line,’ said Forrix, handing Perturabo a data-slate. Perturabo gave a single shake of his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘We do not just run. Angron needs blood, and so we will give it to him.’

The red of the compartment lights poured across the torn surface of his armour. In the pooling shadow, the metal seemed less like plates than scales, the rents shrinking to wounds in the dark. Perturabo’s hand danced over the data-slate, and then he handed it to Forrix.

‘Transmit these orders to all units in orbit.’

‘To the World Eaters?’

‘All units,’ said Perturabo. ‘We will pour blood and fire into the void.’

Forrix glanced at the slate then slotted it into a wall socket. A heartbeat later Argonis saw the order stream unfold in his helm display. It almost stopped the breath in his lungs.

‘This is suicide,’ he breathed.

‘Only if the daemons lied,’ said Perturabo. His eyes were still and unblinking, gleaming black in the red light.

The Iron Warriors ships began to move as the gunships swarmed into their hangars. Engines lit and began to shunt them closer together. Fire lashed out from those nearest the Ultramarines. Volleys sheeted into the killing mass of ships as it closed. The outer parts of the enemy fleet began to turn inwards, enveloping their prey.

Perturabo’s order signals began to cascade through the World Eaters ships. Some of them began to turn and drop closer to the Iron Warriors. Others ploughed on heedlessly, slashing at the enemy ships with rolling volleys of fire.

‘Those ships will be lost,’ said Argonis. The gunship was rising to meet the *Iron Blood* as the great ship cut through the blisters of explosions. Perturabo looked unmoved.

‘Three-quarters of the World Eaters report readiness,’ said Forrix. ‘And the *Conqueror* confirms that Angron is aboard.’

‘How many of the Twelfth remain on the surface?’ asked Perturabo.

‘Impossible to estimate,’ said Forrix. ‘Some certainly. Their discipline is–’

‘We do not wait,’ said Perturabo. The gunship shook as it slammed down onto the hangar deck. ‘Begin the process, all ships keyed to my command.’

‘The *Conqueror*–’ began Forrix.

‘The *Conqueror* will obey or it will die,’ said Perturabo. ‘They can read the consequences, the choice is theirs.’

The hatch opened, and Perturabo was striding out into the gloom of a hangar bay, slashed with stab-beams. Argonis noticed that he moved fluidly, as though neither flesh nor armour had been damaged.

Argonis felt the vibration in the deck increase as he stepped from the gunship. Far beneath his feet the ship’s plasma reactor output began to peak. In the void, the Ultramarines fleet was now a hand enclosing the World Eaters and Iron Warriors. Fire reached out in every direction to meet them. If the commanders of the enemy ships wondered at why the Iron Warriors did not focus their fire and try to punch through, it did not stop them. The net closed. Ships began to die.

The *Stone Breaker* took a nova shell cluster from the *Seneca* and cracked open down its length. Fire rolled through its compartments and deep decks. The strike was only partial, and the secondary shells exploded in the void around its burning hull. It might have survived, until the fires found an ordnance magazine in its hull. The explosion split its carcass open and scattered the remains into a white-hot cloud of gas and debris.

The Ultramarines battleship *Banner of Truth* was the first to strike a close blow at the Iron Warriors. Bombardment arrays flared as they loosed munitions before it. Miniature stars exploded amongst the iron-skinned ships as they began to return fire, but the *Banner of Truth* was an old crusader and it shrugged away their rebukes with a glitter of void shields. The *Strontium Dawn* turned to meet the Ultramarines ship, holding position until the two were ripping shields and then armour apart with point-blank shell and rocket fire. Atmosphere bled from both ships as they hammered each other.

The World Eaters heavy frigate *Death Cut* broke formation and drove towards the pair. Boarding torpedoes shot from its prow and punched into the *Banner of Truth*’s keel. World Eaters poured into the ship’s lower decks. Blood and shouts of panic flowed through the ratings as the sound of chainaxes screamed above the battle sirens. The *Death Cut* pressed on, ramming its prow across the *Banner of Truth*’s bridge. The two ships spun away, tumbling, firing on each other like two enemies hacking at each other as they fell from a cliff.

The first concentrated volleys began to strike the *Iron Blood*. Its prow and spine shields fell in a rolling flash. Gunnery officers on the Ultramarines ships cycled their batteries, racing to fire on the great vessel before it could raise its void envelope again. Fighting a ship of its size was never about single killing blows; they were simply too huge, too heavily armoured and shielded. You had to wear them down, to land strike after strike against its main mass until it died of its wounds. That was what the captains and gunnery commanders had predicted and planned for. But the *Iron Blood*'s shields were not raised again. Instead the Ultramarines' auspex saw reactor spikes across the Iron Warriors and World Eaters ships. Thinking that their prey was about to try to break through their net, they poured power into their own engines. The gap closed.

The *Iron Blood* turned slowly in a growing cloak of fire. Beside it, the *Conqueror* dropped into formation so that the two huge ships were within a kilometre of each other.

'The warp engines are ready,' said Forrix as Perturabo reached his strategium. Argonis watched the Lord of Iron pause then nod.

'Give the order.'

Forrix bowed his head and turned, speaking into the vox. A second later the alert lights flicked from pulsing amber to cold blue. The vibration in the deck was now a high, teeth-itching buzz. Argonis closed his eyes briefly and for the first time felt himself hope that the Dark Gods were watching over them.

Warp translation was not a matter of mechanics. The engines and calculations that allowed ships to rip a hole into the Sea of Souls were a veneer of science over a process that was, in essence, the violation of reality. What seemed rules were little more than reassurance to human minds. One of those rules was that warp translation should only ever be attempted far from the gravity of planets and stars. To disobey that rule was to risk the creation of an unstable rift between worlds, a hungering wound that would draw all it could reach into the beyond.

The Navigators realised what was happening first. Across the Ultramarines fleet they began to shout into the vox. Transmechanics burbled shock and incredulity. Captains began to issue frantic orders to turn, for drives to reverse. Power flushed to engines as some of the Ultramarines fleet scattered across the void. Others, though, ploughed on, their commanders heedless or unaware of the danger.

Space began to crackle with multicoloured lightning. Lesions formed in the skin of reality, and ruptured to glittering voids. Impossible wings churned through the vacuum as hurricanes of blue-and-green fire danced over the ships of the World Eaters and Iron Warriors.

In the heart of the *Iron Blood*, Argonis' hearts stopped beating. He felt as though his skin were being dragged back into his flesh. A single high-pitched note filled his ears, shrieking louder and louder.

The void split. The holes opened in reality ripped wide, flowing together until a ragged grin ran through the arc of Deluge's orbit. Vast eyes and teeth rippled at the edge of the wound. It sat for an instant, both present and an illusion. Then it inhaled. Ships tumbled into the beyond, vast hulls spinning over and over like splinters in a storm. Creatures with mist bodies and howling mouths clawed and bit at their hulls. Down and down and through and through into nothingness the ships fell. Howling wheels of flame tore apart the Ultramarines vessels, bodies spilled into the raw tides of Chaos. Those that were lucky found the claws of waiting carrion daemons. The rest fell on, their flesh dissolving and distorting as their souls screamed in torment.

And through the whirl and babble, the *Iron Blood* and the *Conqueror* fell on. Their sisters tumbled with them, their hulls shimmering in the ghost-light, untouched by claw or storm. On the outside of the *Conqueror*'s bridge, the figure of Angron pulled itself up to the highest point of the hull. His body was a hunched mass of muscle, his wings a vast cloak streaming in the raw winds of the warp. He straightened, his form still holding the image that he bore in the mortal realm. Swarms of the Neverborn spiralled close, calling out, the lesser predators honouring the apex of their kind. Angron raised his arms. Around him the dead of the sundered Ultramarines fleet were red shadows. The false substance of his muscle frayed from him as he tilted back his head and roared in victory and summons.

The storm tides crashed in and bore the ships away in their claws, clutched like infants in a mother's arms. Through the warp, the World Eaters heard the Red Angel's cry and cast their ships into the storm tides.

Layak

'This is it,' said Fulgrim. He appeared to breathe, nostrils flaring, torso swelling. He raised his four arms, palms open, head thrown back, white mane of hair tumbling back down his shoulders. ***'Ullanor. O what fair***

mother of honour, O what cradle of glory…' He let out the breath, and the lids which had hidden his eyes opened. He lowered his arms and his chin, and spat. Rock sizzled and burned where the black phlegm landed. 'Tastes past its best.'

Lord Commander Eidolon made a hooting burst of sound that might have been a laugh. Lorgar glanced at the Emperor's Children officer, then looked away without speaking. Beside Eidolon stood a disordered group of riotously coloured warriors, all of them bearing bulky weapons with wide, grinning barrels and tangles of chromed pipe. They had not questioned the manner of their lord's return once their ships had exited the warp alongside Lorgar's fleet. They had just accepted it and celebrated with slaughter. More were still arriving every hour, children returning to their father's call.

Layak looked away. One hundred warriors of his own Chapter ringed their position. Other than he and Lorgar himself, the rest remained in orbit while the primarchs came to look at the last place that the Imperium had been unified. Actaea had not been seen since the passage through the warp. Lorgar had not mentioned her absence, and Layak had the feeling that the primarch viewed her as a tool that had done its work, and required no more thought.

Rain fell from the iron sheet of the sky. He watched the water run from Lorgar's armour, grey drops on crimson. Ahead the plateau reached away to the horizon, its features beaten flat, its skin carved by rain. The prints of landing craft and war machines still marked the ground. From the air, he had looked down and seen the patterns of the great camps where Legions and armies had landed and been drawn up, their memory still lingering on the grey ground. Water churned at the bottom of shallow gullies between flat expanses of shattered rock. Pools had formed in depressions and reflected the wan daylight back up at the sky above. Small drifts of debris dotted the ground: a neat stack of fuel drums, rusted to a dull orange; the track of a battle tank, lying like a shed snakeskin; the skeleton of some grand marquee, the last of its fabric hanging in sodden tatters from its poles.

Behind them the Imperial Dais rose to touch the flat, iron sky. Muck streaked the white marble and rimmed the eyes of the statues with gritty shadows. There was no mould growing on the stones, though, despite the damp, and Layak had seen nothing growing on the plateau as they flew across it. Orbital imaging had detected flora and fauna creeping back into some of the temperate equatorial regions, but the work done by war and

then the cold hand of the Mechanicum, almost two decades before, held. Ullanor remained a barren land, a grave marker laid at the heart of a dead empire.

The wind threaded through the dais' arches and high walkways, keening long shrill notes through the wet air.

'There is no one here,' gurgled Eidolon.

'All the better if we mean to actually kill our brother once he arrives,' said Fulgrim.

Lorgar shot him a look.

'What?' said Fulgrim with a needle-toothed grin. ***'Did you think I would keep it from my children? Loyalty for them is… personal. I think most of them will rather enjoy murdering Horus. You will, won't you, my pretty little reborn one?'***

Eidolon growled, and Layak felt the sound somehow shake his flesh inside his armour.

'Ah, pride…' crooned Fulgrim, ***'what sweetness is thy gift of pain.'***

Eidolon turned away, his movements somehow both uncoordinated and fluid. Layak watched his eyes contract and bulge as he looked across the ground.

'We should prepare before someone else gets here,' gurgled Eidolon.

'Someone else *is* here. Look…' said Lorgar. He raised his hand to point, and the cluster of mortals and demigods turned to look. A figure stood on the lower tiers of the dais. The rain ran from the cold blue of his armour. He did not move as they looked at him. Fulgrim bared his teeth.

'Oh…' he breathed. ***'I didn't think that he would be here. How wonderful.'***

'Alpha Legion,' gurgled Eidolon.

'Were you hoping that Horus would arrive before we had the inconvenience of wondering if our other brothers and their sons will back your play for the crown?'

Lorgar looked at the still figure on the dais.

'Perturabo and Angron will not arrive in time, if both arrive at all. Mortarion has already been ordered to Terra.'

'Are you so sure?' purred Fulgrim.

Lorgar did not answer but stepped towards the figure.

'Identify yourself,' he called.

'I am Alpharius,' came the reply.

‘Of course,’ said Fulgrim with a chuckle. Then he looked at Lorgar and shrugged. ***‘But on the other hand, he could be…’***

‘There are no signs of them on the planet or in orbit,’ hooted Eidolon.

‘There wouldn’t be,’ said Lorgar softly, eyes still fixed on the lone figure.

‘It could complicate things,’ said Eidolon.

Lorgar shot a hard look at the former Lord Commander.

‘Begin the deployment,’ he said. ‘Everything we have, arrayed in formal order. Weapons loaded and ready.’

‘Talking of complications…’ gurgled Eidolon. They all looked at him. ‘Ships have just entered the system and are making fast speed directly for us. We heard them leave the Great Ocean. Such a clamour.’

‘Who?’ snapped Layak.

Eidolon looked at him. Air sacs in the commander’s throat filled and deflated slowly.

‘Who else? It is the *Vengeful Spirit*. The Sons of Horus are here. The Warmaster is here.’

Layak felt cold circle his gut, though he was not sure why.

‘Proceed as planned,’ said Lorgar a second later. ‘Make all the preparations. We cut him down here when he descends to greet us.’

Layak held the leashes of Fulgrim’s bonds tight until the daemon primarch bowed his head.

‘As you will it, brother. As you will it.’

Lorgar turned away and walked across the grey plain. Layak watched him for a long second, before remembering the figure who had been standing on the dais. He looked up, but the one who had claimed the name Alpharius was nowhere to be seen.

EIGHTEEN

Layak

The black-and-green gunships swept in from beyond the horizon. Stormbirds and Storm Eagles, flanked by interceptors and boxed by strike fighters. Guns rotated in their mounts. Targeting pods swept over the ranked Word Bearers and scattered Emperor's Children.

'One quick missile and this would all be over,' hummed one of Eidolon's honour guard that Layak had not met before, a warrior with a swordsman's swagger and silver-drowned plate.

'No,' purred Fulgrim as the aircraft spiralled overhead***. 'No, no, no, my beautiful Telemachon. First, we would not get the missile loose before we became blood slime under those guns, and second, you do not kill a creature like Horus by shooting his transport down. It is unseemly and lacks the required symbolic flourish that my brother sets such store by.'*** Fulgrim flicked a needle smile at Lorgar. ***'Isn't that right, brother-my-delight?'***

'Begin the cacophony as soon as he sets down,' said Lorgar, without looking around. Layak waited for a moment and then breathed the command into Fulgrim.

'As you say,' hissed the daemon primarch. ***'It will be done. Eidolon, set my sons to singing.'***

'A pleasure,' the Lord Commander gurgled, and hissed a command into the vox.

A Stormbird burst from above the dais. It was black, its fuselage darkened by soot. Red, slit eyes gleamed on its wings and cheeks, each one set in an eight-pointed gold star. Thrusters rotated down its fuselage, slamming it to stationary in mid-air. It descended. Coils of dust rose in the downwash.

High above the surface of the world, Layak knew that the Emperor's Children would be beginning their first task in this murder. In the bowels of ships, the flesh of thousands of slaves began to feel the caress of a myriad of tools as their blood flooded with sensation enhancers. Sounds rose from them, each mouth an instrument in a symphony of agony. Machines of silver and chromed steel caught the sound, split it, channelled it through pipes and through devices made to designs that had broken the minds of their makers. The sounds stretched, feeding back on themselves, so that the screams of the slaves began to shatter their skulls and vibrate the flesh from their bones. Mists of pain began to form in the warp around them as their souls were stretched between living and dying. The sound-smiths listened to the deluge of noise in their amplification cradles, the colour of their armour swirling in time to its texture. Then, when it had reached the edge of perfection, they released it. Vox-shunts began to burn out as the cacophony spread across the orbital vox.

Fifty yards from Layak, the gunship touched the soil of Ullanor. Hatches opened. Warriors in jet-black armour poured from within, flowing out into a wide circle.

Eidolon shifted stance, head cocked as though listening. The sacs on his neck rippled and pulsed.

'Our ships are reading a large force of ships approaching from sunward,' he hooted, turning to look at the two primarchs.

Fulgrim's smile broadened.

'My guess would be that it is one or more of our esteemed brothers.'

'They will not be able to hear or see what happens here,' said Lorgar, his voice as devoid of emotion as his expression. 'Identify them, and send the signal as prepared. It will be truth soon enough.'

They looked back to the black gunship as the nose ramp opened. Three figures came from the gunship's mouth: Kibre in polished jet, his eyes moving over the surroundings; Aximand in sea-green, his flayed and re-stitched face set in an expression like thunder; and last the figure of Tormageddon, its face hidden by a horned helm, its aura a black banner dragged behind it. Layak could feel the emotions bubbling and fizzing into the ether from the two mortal warlords, like lightning searching for a path to the ground. They would have given him pause, if it had not been for the figure who came after them.

Horus, Warmaster of the Imperium, Anointed of the Pantheon, stepped into the light.

Argonis

‘Approaching auspex range,’ came the shout of the augur officer from behind Argonis. The man was a human, but his flesh was lost beneath a tangle of cables, and the upper part of his face was a blank, riveted mask of iron. A blue slit of light pulsed across where his eyes would have been. ‘Multiple ships in close and high orbit – I read twelve ships in a diffuse picket sphere.’

‘Augurs to maximum,’ said Perturabo. ‘Mark every vessel. Switch power to weapons once we have targets locked. Set assault launch readiness.’

Argonis could almost feel the menace of the words take flight in the air. He watched as the data curtains rippled with tides of change. Curt shouts cut through the gloom of the chamber. Perturabo was a statue at its centre, the silent unblinking bulk of Volk at his shoulder. The fleets had come out of the warp on the further side of Ullanor’s sun and had crossed the system, keeping it between them and the target planet, and after that directly behind them so that the star’s radiation would confuse all but the most direct and focused sensors. That had tried the patience of the World Eaters, but they had followed. Now they were coming into sensor range of Ullanor’s orbits.

‘You think this paranoia, son of Horus?’ said Forrix from beside him.

Argonis did not reply.

‘You go to your Warmaster with your swords drawn,’ he said, at last. Repeating his objection to Perturabo’s order when it had first been given.

‘That is the thing about war, don’t you find? You never know when you will have to fight.’ Forrix paused, eyes moving over his own data screens. ‘Or whom.’

The *Iron Blood* shivered as hundreds of breeches slammed shut over their shells. Fumes of gas swirled over plasma turrets as they vented coolant into cold vacuum. Before it, the orb of Ullanor hung, swirled grey and white with cloud, its moons great pearls around its neck. In the blackness of its orbit, ships hung as pinpricks of reflected sunlight.

‘Initial vessel identification reads primary Legion vessels,’ came the call of an auspex officer, but Argonis knew that Perturabo would have read the data seconds before. ‘Two main strength forces of the Third and

Seventeenth Legions, and a smaller force of the Sixteenth in closer orbit. Engine signatures indicate at least two Gloriana-class vessels.'

Argonis frowned at the tactical readouts.

'We should be able to hail and read their identifications.'

'Vox-links are blanked out,' said the auspex officer.

'What–' he began to ask.

'Screaming,' said Forrix, glancing up. 'Every channel is filled with screaming.'

'The World Eaters are building up to full attack speed,' called an Iron Warriors bridge officer.

'Good,' said Perturabo.

Argonis strode forwards. The Iron Circle twitched towards him but stilled as Perturabo turned to look at him.

'What is this?'

'Prudence,' said the Lord of Iron.

'The Warmaster–'

'Has yet to speak his own will,' said Perturabo. His dark eyes flashed. 'Those are Third Legion vessels in the void. The last time I saw them it was in the wake of treachery.' He tapped the layered plates of his armour. 'A lesson taught in blood is remembered in iron.'

'Lord,' called Forrix, the dry control in his voice cracking. 'We have a signal…'

'From the *Vengeful Spirit?*'

Forrix shook his head

'It is from the *Trisagion*, from Lorgar…'

Something moved in the mirror-dark of Perturabo's eyes, and then he looked up at Forrix.

'What does it say?'

Forrix's face was white in the cold light of data readouts.

'The Warmaster is dead.'

Ekaddon

'What do you mean you cannot reach the surface?' snarled Ekaddon. Sota-Nul's robes shivered in what might have passed for a shrug. Behind him the bridge of the *Vengeful Spirit* sang to a sudden swirl of alertness.

'The full spectrum of our communications is filled with high-power distortion patterns, which arose as soon as the Warmaster's Stormbird was

on the planetary surface. We cannot break through directly, and it will take time to sift-phase the distortion out. That will take a primary estimate of thirty-one minutes. Until then its occlusive effect is rated at ninety-nine point eight-two-five…'

'Use the astropaths.'

'The distortion extends into the etheric. It is creating a total spectrum nullification. Transcendent. Occult. Profane. It is total.'

His mind was racing. What was happening could only mean one thing: betrayal.

'What about the rest of the fleet?'

'The blanket distortion of our communications has not altered in the eighteen seconds since I last explained its effects.'

Ekaddon bit back a rebuke.

'What is its source?' he asked, forcing calm into his voice.

'Uncertain. The distortion is spilling into this vessel's sensors.'

Ekaddon bared his teeth and drew breath for a flow of Cthonian invective.

'But…' said Sota-Nul. 'I could hazard a guess.'

He looked at the clusters of lights inside her black cowl. Tech-priests did not guess. Sota-Nul's voice had held an undoubtable note of pleasure as she spoke.

'Guess?'

'Yes,' she said, turning and gliding across to the centre of the chamber and looking up to where the arc of Ullanor sliced across the view beyond the crystal dome above. Glimmers of light shone against the grey planet and the black void, each one another vessel. 'If I were to indulge a guess I would say its source was the Third Legion.'

Ekaddon felt his blood freeze cold in his flesh. Then he was moving, running for the doors.

'All units, prepare for immediate planetstrike.'

Layak

'Lorgar,' said Horus as he walked from the gunship. Kibre followed in his wake, the mace *Worldbreaker* held before him. But for all the Widowmaker's transhuman power, he was a mote of fire dragged behind a comet.

Horus Lupercal filled Layak's sight, pulling in his senses, shredding every other detail so that he and only he filled the world.

Armour of night…

Cloak of spilling fire…

Blades of starlight…

The sight struck like a physical blow. Layak felt his mind turning and turning again, tumbling like leaves caught in a blast wave. Darkness snapped and coiled in the Warmaster's shadow. The ground beneath his tread became black glass, became a cracked mirror, became obsidian. His face was shining, the features like a burn left on the retina and mind.

The throng of warriors gathered behind Lorgar and Fulgrim shrank back, Emperor's Children and Word Bearers alike falling to their knees.

'Stand,' said Horus, and the word pulled the warriors to their feet.

Fulgrim slid to the side, bowing his head, his white hair falling across his face. Layak could feel the tethers he had bound to the daemon primarch's soul dig deep as it screamed to be released. Lorgar had bowed his head, his hands rested on the grip of his mace, its head resting at his feet.

'Brother,' said Horus.

Lorgar was looking up, a tranquil smile on his face.

Layak spun a fragment of will in his mind. Fulgrim's hands ghosted to the handles of his swords. The air around the dais was taut. The mask was flaying his face, spikes burrowing into his flesh, as though it were trying to dig itself through his skull. Behind them the ranked warriors stood beneath the grey sky. Rain was dancing on the black armour of the Justaerin, droplets exploding in silver shards.

This cannot work, said a voice in Layak's mind, a voice that was at once his own and was not. *Lorgar was wrong.*

'My Warmaster,' Lorgar was saying, and Layak saw Horus raise his hand as though in beneficent greeting. The world was fractured, images passing with the stuttering seconds. Lorgar still and Eidolon looking on with cold eyes. Fulgrim looked at Layak, hate burning from the gaze.

It was now. It would have to be now. One instant. One perfect instant of betrayal.

Fulgrim would strike. Then Lorgar would open his mind. The blood and bone that Lorgar had salted into the earth in a ritual octed would hear that last votive voice, and the dead souls and lost voices of the warp would rise and drown Horus, and then Lorgar would strike a last, final blow with the

words of the gods on his lips. The Sons of Horus on the planet's surface would be slaughtered by Fulgrim's children. Those in orbit would be given a choice, rise in glory or die in vain. The other Legions would come, and they would see that the Warmaster had fallen, and they would kneel to the Voice of the Gods.

'You are left with one thing that means that you are not a slave,' said the remembered voice of Actaea, but for a moment it seemed as though it were real, as though it were speaking the words to him. *'You have a choice.'*

'The gods must triumph, and Horus will not give them victory,' Lorgar had said. *'Another must take his place…'*

But if the Warmaster does not fall, said the voice of his thoughts.

Horus was reaching out, his hand raised as though to bless or embrace Lorgar.

Layak bowed his head. His will formed and hardened. Fulgrim thrashed against the binding.

Horus rises.

The Warmaster's blow struck Lorgar in the chest, and lifted him off the ground.

Argonis

'The Warmaster expired as he touched the planet surface,' said Forrix into the shocked silence. 'The wounds of Russ overcame him at last.'

Eyes turned to Argonis. Blackness unfolded in his mind, flowing out through his nerves and stealing the sensation from his limbs.

This could not be real. After all that had been, this moment could not be real.

'Is it a direct link?' he asked, his mouth dry. 'To Lorgar?'

'No, it's a relayed message packet. There is a communications anomaly blanking communication. This was the only way they could hail us.'

Argonis felt the black tide in his thoughts shift, briefly frozen senses sharpening. He looked up and met Perturabo's cold, steady gaze.

'The *Vengeful Spirit* is in orbit, it must be. Get me a communication link to it.'

The blue light in the augur officer's visor pulsed briefly.

'That is not possible, my lord. The only open communication channel is with the *Trisagion*.'

Argonis met Perturabo’s gaze again. Silent understanding reflected back from the black mirrors of the primarch’s eyes.

‘The daemon spoke true,’ said Argonis. Behind Perturabo, the shadowed bulk of Volk twitched, head rising.

‘Treachery,’ said Perturabo, then turned his gaze to Forrix. ‘Accelerate to battle speed. All ships lock first targets to the Third and Seventeenth Legions.’

‘And the World Eaters and their lord?’

‘Tell them that Horus is betrayed – loose the dogs to their work.’

Layak

The world blinked. Light flashed out. Shadows fled.

Armour cracked. Blood touched the air in pinprick droplets.

Lorgar tumbled back from Horus’ hand.

Fulgrim froze. Everything froze. Stillness spread in a blast wave. Lorgar struck the ground. Shattered stone fountained up. Layak watched. The threads of Fulgrim’s name were silent in his mind. His mask was cold against his face.

Horus lowered his hand. His face was set, features chiselled by shadow. Kibre stood close behind him, *Worldbreaker* held in both his hands. Lorgar tried to rise to his knees, mouth opening. Horus half turned and took his mace from Kibre. He turned and swung in a single movement. The blow was slow, unhurried, carrying the contempt of a living god touching a mortal. The mace’s power fields were not active, its weight cold. It struck Lorgar in the chest and snapped his head up as he flew back, twisting, blood gasping from between shattered teeth. Horus stood, the mace held casually at his side, his presence towering like a thundercloud, roaring with silence.

Through the eyes of his mask Layak saw the sight of the Warmaster flicker, blinking between images: a towering figure of black shadow, face lit by ghost-light; a warlord clad in wolfskins, his hands and face red with blood; a king cloaked in sable and crowned with burning laurels; a cloaked prince in pearl-white and gold plate. Each image slid into being and away, each as real as the one that had just passed.

Lorgar began to rise. His aura was a spinning cloud of wounded-red and fever-yellow. Mocking, impious faces grinned from the ether. Blood was running from the corners of his eyes as he looked at Fulgrim, but the Prince of Pleasure did not move. Fulgrim laughed, and Layak felt the sound as the

caress of a thousand razors on the inside of his skull. Lorgar looked at Layak.

Layak looked back into the eyes of the being that had broken his soul and made him a slave. And shook his head.

Lorgar's mouth opened to shout. Layak could feel his lord's mind reach for the warp, desperate, clawing, screaming.

Horus stepped forwards. A wave of force flipped Lorgar through the air and onto his back. Layak could see the currents of the ether draining away from around his primarch. His aura was withering to tatters of white shock. But he was still a primarch, his flesh forged by secrets known only to the false god who made him. He forced himself to rise. Horus struck him across the back. Crimson armour cracked, and Lorgar slammed down into the ground. Horus kicked him, once, the movement a ripple of strength and a shrug of mental power. Lorgar flipped over onto his back. Horus lowered *Worldbreaker* to rest on Lorgar's chest.

'You injure me, brother,' said Horus. His voice was low, calm.

'I serve–'

'You are faithless. You covet what is not yours and cannot be yours. You undo all that you have done.'

Lorgar looked up at the Warmaster.

For a moment Layak thought he would protest, but then Lorgar stilled, his features hard and calm beneath the running blood.

'You are flawed. You will falter, and the gods will abandon you.'

'But I do not go to make an empire for the gods, brother. I am Warmaster – the gods bow to me, and all will kneel and know that I am their saviour.'

Lorgar laughed, the sound chill.

'No,' he said. 'No, they will not.'

Horus looked at him for a long moment, then raised *Worldbreaker*. Cords of telekinetic force pulled Lorgar up. A haze of heat surrounded the primarch.

'You wish to take this power from me…' said Horus, and reached out with his talon. The blade-fingers were white slits in the world. Lorgar's mace rose from the ground where it had fallen. Dust fell from its head as it dragged free and arced to fall beneath Lorgar's feet. 'Then take it, brother.'

Lorgar looked at the fallen mace. Layak was still, half his mind willing the primarch to take up the weapon, the rest screaming for him to leave it

on the ground. He was breathing hard. His skin was pale, the veins clear and dark beneath.

‘In the ashes of Monarchia, did our father give you such a chance?’ said Horus. ‘Come, pick it up. Kill the master you call weak. The gods are watching, Lorgar. I can feel them waiting.’

Lorgar raised his eyes, straightening. Layak could barely look at Horus now. There was just a void, a screaming wound in reality. He could see the Warmaster though, as if a different image were reaching his mind without his eyes.

‘I…’ Lorgar’s voice was a dry rasp. ‘I… pity you.’

‘If you will not fight for your beliefs,’ said Horus, ‘then you will kneel.’ Lorgar bent, invisible forces pulling him down until his forehead touched the blackened marble. Horus raised *Worldbreaker* above his head.

Lorgar tensed.

Horus paused. Layak thought he saw the ghost of an expression flicker across Horus’ face, as though for an instant something drowned had floated to the surface of a storm-churned sea.

‘Oh, please kill him,’ said Fulgrim. ***‘Please, this is just too wonderfully cruel to be allowed to continue.’***

‘Silence,’ said Horus, still looking down at Lorgar. Fulgrim’s laughter vanished. Horus lowered his mace. For a second, Layak thought Horus looked as he had when he last stood on this world, not a shadow of power but a warrior who was greater than any man but less than a god: terrifying and noble.

‘Go,’ said Horus. Lorgar did not move. Layak saw Falkus Kibre glance at Horus Aximand, puzzlement flashing over their faces. ‘If you enter my presence again, the judgment I withhold shall fall upon you.’ Still, Lorgar did not move. ‘Go!’ roared Horus, and the shout echoed out across the plateau like a peal of thunder.

Lorgar rose to his feet and looked as though he were going to say something, but then turned away.

‘What of his warriors?’ growled Falkus Kibre from next to his lord.

Horus turned to look at the ranks of crimson legionaries waiting on the plains below. Then he turned and looked at Layak. Behind the Crimson Apostle, the five thousand warriors of the Unspeaking watched. He thought of all that had been done to him, all that had been taken from him, all that he had done and become in the service of gods that he had never chosen.

Lorgar had turned to look at Layak. Stone dust had smudged parts of the primarch's crimson armour to grey.

'You are left with one thing that means that you are not a slave – you have a choice.'

In his mind he let go of the syllables of Fulgrim's name and felt the bonds holding the daemon's will break. The Prince of Pleasure gasped, a sound of exultation and pleasure, then lashed forwards, faster than a lightning strike. Blood gushed from Lorgar's cheek as he fell back to the ground. Fulgrim coiled above him, looking down smiling, raising his clawed hand to lick his brother primarch's blood from his clawed fingers.

'You should never let someone else bear a burden you are afraid of, Lorgar,' said Fulgrim. 'It has a habit of creating resentment.'

Layak looked up from Lorgar to Horus.

Slowly, each limb and joint moving with considered care, Zardu Layak knelt.

'My Warmaster,' he said. Behind him, thousands of crimson warriors fell to their knees.

A high, shrill chuckle cut the air as Fulgrim began to laugh.

Argonis

'Communication blanket cleared,' shouted the augur officer.

Argonis turned and looked at the tactical display as it lit with ship identifiers.

'Lord, we have a signal from the surface of Ullanor,' said Forrix.

'Solutions locked on targets, lord,' called a cable-encrusted ordnance overseer. 'Firing by your command.'

Perturabo looked at Forrix.

'What is the signal?' asked Perturabo.

'The *Trisagion* is breaking orbit,' called the augur officer. 'It is making full speed for the outer system gulf. We will have lost our firing solution lock on it in nine seconds.'

Forrix was blinking at the signal readout.

'The signal,' rasped Perturabo.

'It is…' Forrix looked up, eye bright. 'It is the Warmaster.'

Argonis felt the black tension in his mind release.

'What does he say?'

The scream of an augur officer cut off any reply. Sparks fountained through the air. Servitors thrashed in their harness.

The tactical display dissolved into fragments of static and light. The reek of ozone filled Argonis' mouth. A high, ringing note pierced through his mind, stabbing deeper and deeper, rolling with pain. Alerts began to blare, screaming as forces spun the *Iron Blood* in the void like a splinter of wood before the storm.

'The last of them comes,' said a voice that somehow carried through the sound. Argonis forced his head around to see that Volk's eyes had closed, his body a mass of flowing fluid metal. ***'The Lord of Many Faces sends his son of sons to war.'***

The display snapped back into fidelity. Lines of distortion ran across it. The markers of the Iron Warriors and World Eaters ships were scattered. Those in orbit rolled and pitched against the gravity well, even as he watched. Between and around them spread a rolling mass of boiling light and glittering mist. And from the storm, borne by it and spilling from its fury, came another fleet.

Ekaddon

The Sons of Horus fell through Ullanor's grey sky, hundreds of drop pods and dozens of gunships diving from the edge of the atmosphere to the surface beneath. Thrusters burned rain to steam as they fired. Fire trailed from wings as craft cut from void to air.

Mag-harnessed within his drop pod, Ekaddon felt the world roar around him. It was treachery. He was dropping into a battle zone, he was sure of it, descending from heaven to make war on another group of brothers who had once been sworn to the same cause. He almost smiled, remembering the first time, the roar in his guts as he went down to slaughter Legion brothers. Now, falling to an unknown fate, the blood of his own kind still fresh on his blade, he was not even surprised. Things spun apart; that was their nature. That was why there were wars and warriors to fight them, why some used power and some were subject to power. For a second, as the force of the fall tried to pull him into unconsciousness, he thought that this moment was inevitable, that it would be the fate of his kind forever more: war and treachery and retribution without cease or need of a reason. Even the Warmaster could not stand in the way of that. It was the tide of fate that dragged them all.

‘*Thirty seconds to impact,*’ droned a servitor voice in his helm.

Static shrieked in his ear, sudden and loud. Pixelated tactical readouts burst across his helm display.

‘*…there is…*’ he heard Sota-Nul’s wet, rasping voice, chopping through the squall of sound. ‘*No threat… fleet… close orbit.*’

‘Say again, *Vengeful Spirit,*’ he shouted.

‘*Ten seconds to impact,*’ came the servitor countdown.

He gripped his weapon and breathed out. Thrusters fired. Force slammed up through the pod, shaking through Ekaddon.

‘*Five, four, three, two…*’

The drop pod stuck the ground. The jolt of force blinded Ekaddon for a second as blood punched into his eyeballs. Then the outer panels of the pod blew off. The mag-harnesses snapped free, and Ekaddon and his squad were charging clear, pushed by training beyond hesitation. Light poured into his eyes as he emerged. Above them the Imperial Dais rose to meet a sky that was streaked with the fire of falling drop pods and gunships.

Ekaddon’s charge slowed and then stopped.

Where he had thought to see battle, stillness filled his eyes. Thunder-diluted silence filled his ears.

A sea of warriors was looking up at the sky above. Crimson Word Bearers, black and storm-green Sons of Horus, multicoloured Emperor’s Children. All were still and all were looking at the heavens. All except Horus. Ringed by his Justaerin, the Warmaster was looking at Ekaddon, eyes boring into him from across the hundred paces that separated them.

He smiled as more drop pods slammed into the plateau around them, and more warriors bounded out and went still, chainblades chugging to silence, guns lowering.

‘Unnecessary,’ said Horus, and his voice carried to Ekaddon, as though the Warmaster were standing next to him. ‘But then again, he might appreciate as grand a welcome as his arrival.’

Horus looked up, and Ekaddon followed his gaze in time to see the sky turn red. Crimson poured into the heavens like blood poured into milk. Folded clouds took on the texture and colour of flayed muscle. Lightning arced, silver lines remaining after the flash and then cracking open. Huge eyes looked down from above, split pupils rolling in amber irises. The breath in Ekaddon’s mouth tasted of burning cinnamon and spun sugar. As he watched, a funnel of cloud and flame reached from the sky to the earth.

On the ground, weapons were rising, shouts of alert and shock were echoing across the static-laced vox-net. Fulgrim had grown, wings and armour congealing over his form, fangs bared as he hissed at the sky. Only Horus stood unmoved, watching the burning tornado descend without expression.

He raised his talon, and the gesture rippled through the throng, stilling hands on weapons and quieting voices in throats. The fiery column touched the ground. Stone fused beneath it. Warning chimes sounded in Ekaddon's helm as the heat prickled sweat from his skin. The flames curdled to black smoke, peeling back over figures that stood within the furnace glow, black silhouettes with high-crested helms. The fire drained from the air, shrinking to a narrow column. Nine warriors stood on the blackened ground around the burning pillar. Their armour was crimson, edged by ivory and untouched by the flame that had held them. Serpents and jackals snarled from their shoulders and chests, staring at the world around them with emerald and sapphire eyes. Bladed staffs and curved swords hung in their hands. Guttering flames clung to the cutting edges.

Ekaddon recognised the colours, the symbols, the serpentine sun that marked their shoulders. But the image could not be. They were dead and gone, their world burned from beneath them, their memory cast into the dark.

'Ghosts…' he breathed, and heard the word come from the grille of his helm.

A laugh rose through the air, louder than the roar of the flames.

+Not ghosts,+ said the voice of the flames. The column of flame twisted, forming the contours of muscle, flickering into the image of a towering figure with a single eye of blue fire in its skull.

'Magnus,' said Horus, still not moving.

+Horus,+ replied the Crimson King.

'What purpose brings you here?'

Magnus the Red stepped forwards, the copper of his flesh and silver of his armour forming from the cooling flames as he moved. Fulgrim coiled, blades still drawn, teeth bared.

+We come for war,+ spoke Magnus. +We come to carry our vengeance to Terra, that it might burn as Prospero burned. We come in answer to your call…+ Magnus stopped. He was taller than Fulgrim, a looming giant amongst demigods, but he seemed to shrink as he approached, geometry

warping, his fire somehow diminished in Horus' shadow. And then he knelt, newly formed flesh folding to the ground. Behind him, the nine Thousand Sons bent their knees.

+My Warmaster,+ said Magnus the Red.

NINETEEN

Argonis

The armada that would break the cradle of mankind arrived the way rain starts after a season of drought. First a single drop falling from an iron sky to touch dry ground. Then a second, and then the deluge pouring from heaven without end. Ships came from the warp, churning reality to ragged froth as they cut back into being, adding to the might of those already gathered above Ullanor. The first of the new arrivals came in midnight clad, their gun towers snarling with dirty gold leers, their hulls cobwebbed by silver lightning bolts. The *Covenant of Blood*, the *Excoriator* and the *Echo of Damnation* drifted from their translation points, wary and sullen. Others followed. Clusters of craft from every Legion that had pledged to Horus' cause, and more besides. Ships in unknown liveries and bearing strange names slid from the night like rough beasts called from the edge of the world. The *Cradle of Light*, bearing the Brotherhood of Scorn; the *Sepulchral Sword* and the *Song of the Unliving*, marked with the heraldry of seven different Legions. On came the mongrel children of strife. And with them came ships crewed by mortals, thousands of them, from schools of strike frigates to the gigantic cannon-barge *Mithras*, all of them responding to the Warmaster's call.

From the strategium of the *Iron Blood,* Perturabo watched each of them appear on the fleet's sensor mesh and then issued the order that moved them into place in the spheres above Ullanor. Guns tracked each arrival, their command slaved to the will of the Lord of Iron. Signals greeted the new ships, confirming loyalty, ship condition and troop strength. Perturabo, Grand High Marshal to the Warmaster, saw and held each set of data, slotting it in to the scheme forming in his mind. The title that he now bore mattered little beside the reality that he was creating. Every scrap of strength and materiel extended along an axis into the future, sliding into

models and plans as they were matched against Dorn’s Solar defences. In his soul, the values of destruction spun and danced and created a beauty that only he would ever see. When the flow of arrivals had slackened, the duty would pass to Forrix, with Soltarn Vull, Bronn and Berossus to aid him. Even then, the data arrangement would be almost overwhelming. To the Lord of Iron it was a song that he was only now being allowed to bring into being.

Shuttles and landing ships passed from the ships to the planet’s surface without cease. Each moved only when ordained and authorised, watched by the overlapping guns of Iron Warriors and Sons of Horus warships. They descended through an unsullied atmosphere. The clouds had been salted with crystals to clear the skies above the Imperial Dais and the Victory Parade. Sunlight and starlight touched the white marble of the dais for the first time in years. Closer to the ground, the shuttles and landing craft swirled in stacked flights. Black-winged interceptors slid amongst them, weapons armed and sensors watching. One by one, they dropped to the ground. Plumes of dust rose from the drying earth as thrusters fired.

Hundreds of thousands of warriors and tens of thousands of war machines already carpeted the planet. A city of landing craft covered the Triumphal Plateau. Roads of segmented metal covered the ground between the machines. Slave battalions and Mechanicum machines moved between the craft under the direction of Iron Warriors, and squads of Sons of Horus watched from towers of welded girders.

Every Legion and faction held to its own quarter, great reaches divided by avenues of flame-topped pillars. A great pavilion of gilded plates and multicoloured silk had unfolded from the drop-ship that housed Fulgrim’s court of pleasure. A sweet, glistening fog hung above it, and a swelling of screams and laughter rose to meet the roar of thrusters and the clank of machines. The camp of the Word Bearers shone with flames beneath the red-and-black hulls of their temple craft. A forest of impaled humans rose amongst them, and black smoke breathed into the air from firepits. The landing craft of the Titan Legions loomed above the rest, blackened cliffs of metal from which the god machines would walk.

Only the World Eaters were held in orbit, and would be until the last hours of the muster: to do anything else risked slaughter. Even then there had been skirmishes between some forces. Blood had blessed the soil of Ullanor, and some forces had been decimated as punishment and example.

The corpses and fire-gutted shells of armour lined the wide avenues that converged on the parade and dais.

And still more came from the sky to join those on the ground.

At the Triumph a decade and a half before, it had taken months for the Mechanicum to prepare the ground and weeks to array the forces that took part. Perturabo had bent his mind and will to see this mustering complete in less than fourteen days. So far, his timetable had been followed to the minute.

On the surface, Argonis watched from the dais as the lights of the landing craft chased the setting sun beneath the horizon. They had kept coming until Perturabo relinquished his control of the marshalling and descended to the surface to stand with his brothers.

They stood as they had decades before, high on the Imperial Dais. Perturabo beside Magnus, the two separating Angron and Fulgrim. The air wept red around the World Eaters primarch, and his head twitched like a starved dog. Fulgrim grinned his needle smile, and his laughs of delight tore at the souls of warriors passing within earshot. The marble they stood upon had been blasted white, the statues anointed in blood, and the symbols of the pantheon fluttered on the wind beside the banners of the nine Legions that would make the new Imperium. Beneath them a river of flesh and iron had marched, their shouts of salute and praise a rolling roar of voices blending with the blare of war-horns and the clatter of machines. They began as dark fell, burning brands in their hands, flame and sparks streaming from great cages of coals set on the backs of Titans. On they came, through growing twilight and into the night, passing under the eyes of the lords of the new Imperium, until just before dawn the Sons of Horus came. The rising sun glinted off the Eye of Horus, set on shoulders and borne on banners, and the great cry came from the warriors as they passed the dais.

‘Lupercal! Imperator! Lupercal!’ On and on, louder and louder.

And as they had passed, Horus had raised *Worldbreaker*, and silence had echoed before the sea of warriors and war engines had given single voice to a cry that rose and rose, as though to shake the stars in the firmament.

They were all there, all the great and small who defied the tyranny of the False Emperor of Mankind. Even sons of the Night Haunter had responded to the call, and with the arrival of the Crimson King all of the defiant Legions were represented. All except one. The warriors of the Alpha

Legion were nowhere to be seen. Alpharius had been there, though, waiting at the edge of the great turning of events like a phantom at a feast. The Emperor's Children and Word Bearers had told Horus of the figure they had seen, and Argonis had watched his lord nod, then look up to an empty point in the distance.

'He will come when he is ready,' the Warmaster had said. And that night, on the eve of the parade of forces, Alpharius had come.

He came alone. No one saw him until he was on the threshold of the chamber in the dais that Horus had made his council room. It had been Malcador's in the days before the first triumph, and the Imperial Eagles still glowered from amongst the eye-marked banners. Argonis, attending on his master, watched as the Justaerin snapped into sudden action, guns rising, chain and powerblades screaming to life.

'Hold,' Horus said without looking away from the spinning hololith of the Solar System projected in the centre of the room. 'Let him pass.'

Alpharius walked forwards and stopped a pace from Horus. The only weapon he bore was a sheathed dagger at his waist, the grip fashioned in the shape of two intertwined snakes. Scales covered his armour, glinting iridescent blue, and a helm with a low crest hid his face. He did not remove it.

'You bring me no warriors, brother. They did not perish at the gates of Terra, and yet they are… not here. So what do you come to lay at your Warmaster's feet?'

Alpharius did not reply, but simply took a small black-and-brass cylinder from a recess in his armour. Data sockets gleamed at either end of the rod. Alpharius held it out. Horus looked at him, his focus bleeding out into the air around him. Argonis winced at the pressure in his skull. Horus gestured, and Argonis stepped forwards to take the data cylinder. Alpharius held up his free hand, and the gesture was somehow enough to freeze Argonis in mid-stride. Horus and Alpharius remained still, looking at each other, the Master of Serpents seeming small beneath the undiluted focus of the Warmaster. Argonis wondered how anything could remain still under that gaze.

Then, slowly, without breaking his focus, Horus reached out and took the cylinder.

Alpharius nodded. Horus tossed it to Argonis, who slotted it into an isolated cogitator. Cogs clattered, discs of silver spun, and then cones of

holo-light unfolded in the air. First came the great body of the Sun, and then its planets, each blooming to dominate the view before shrinking as their siblings were added. Moons, orbital habitats, drifts of void stations and fortresses glimmered into view. Data shone in haloes around them, flowing with strength specifications, tactical weaknesses and threat reaction parameters. Argonis recognised the image; it was a strategic view of the Solar System but threaded and woven with information on every detail of its defences, from communication response times to main troop strengths. It was staggering, a treasure of intelligence from the heart of Rogal Dorn's fortress.

Horus did not look at it, as though he had known what Alpharius would bring.

'You have my thanks,' said Horus. Behind him the projection of the Solar System spun, its secrets unfolding like flowers in sunlight. 'You have done as I asked but come alone. Where is your Legion?'

Alpharius did not move for a long moment. Reflections of the display flowed across the green lenses of his helm.

Then he drew the knife from his waist. The motion was simple, not a grand flourishing or threat-filled flash, but still the Justaerin twitched. Horus did not move. Alpharius held the dagger up. It was long and double-edged. Twin serpents were etched on the blade to match the grip, one coiling towards the hilt, one towards the tip. Alpharius held it still for a second, then reached up with his other hand. He gripped the blade. Razor edges bit into ceramite. Argonis realised what he was going to do an instant before the blade shattered in Alpharius' grasp. He opened his hand, and slivers of metal fell between the fingers like sharp petals of a crushed rose. Then he dropped the dagger's hilt at Horus' feet, turned and walked towards the door. The Justaerin moved to stop him, but Horus gave a small shake of his head.

'No,' he said. 'Let him go.'

Argonis looked back from the image of Alpharius to the broken dagger and the mirror coin lying on the stone floor.

He had thought of Ekaddon, then, and the conversation he'd had with the Mournival after Horus had summoned him.

Abaddon had been there, returned from his hounding of the Wolves, the Red Angel a fire-wreathed shadow at his back. The others – Aximand,

Kibre and Tormageddon – had formed an arc around him, watching. Abaddon had spoken first.

‘I opposed the choice of you,’ said Abaddon as he turned to look at him squarely. ‘Just so that you know.’

Argonis held his gaze for a second and then shook his head.

‘My thanks for the clarification, First Captain.’

Abaddon’s mouth thinned.

‘The Warmaster requires an equerry,’ Tormageddon said. ‘He sent us to summon you. And we took the opportunity to–’

‘There is a matter that needs dealing with,’ Aximand said, his voice flat, his eyes fixed on the distance. ‘A matter that the Warmaster cannot address and has forbade us to, and so you must address for him, lord equerry.’

The words that came after had followed him into his audience with the Warmaster, and turned through his mind as he looked at Alpharius’ broken and discarded dagger, and rose again now as he heard the roar of the armies that would burn Terra. Once they were gone, the pyres would be lit and one-tenth of the slave strength of all the Legions would be burned alive on this spot. It would be an offering, a libation to the gods at the commencement of the last great battle for mankind.

He thought of the symbol he now bore atop an iron staff, not as an emissary but as the voice of the Warmaster. He thought of the deeds he would have to do. Of the first deed he would have to do. He thought of Cthonia, long ago but still remembered, of his blood brothers and the flash of a grin behind a knife as they ran to make murder. He thought of Volk looking at him on a smoke- and mist-streaked dawn, on the side of a mountain, far away now.

‘The end was only a dream, and what do dreams matter?’

Argonis waited for the shouts of exhortation to fade, and then walked away from the view into the shadow of marble corridors and the ghosts of his own thoughts.

Layak

Layak looked up as the wind brought the scent of the pyres to his nose. The light of the armada filled his mask-helm’s eyes. There were cruisers, destroyers, bombardment barques, macro-carriers, battle-barges, cities of stone and iron filled with tens of thousands of souls. The flames of those souls outlined the craft, illuminating them in the sight of his mask. They

slid across Ullanor's sky, seeming to streak through the heavens even though they were still, tethered to stationary orbit.

'What do you see?' said a voice from behind him. Hebek shifted posture, hand going to his sword, like a dog raising its hackles.

'Lady Actaea,' he said without looking around. 'You bless and honour me with your presence.'

He turned. She stood two paces behind him, hands by her sides, the aching roar of her psychic aura dimmed as though it were a fire in need of fuel. The wind caught her robe, and she pulled the blood-crusted velvet closer. She had her face turned upwards towards the now-clear sky and the night laid out across it. He followed the line of her attention and found the ships of the Emperor's Children. They sparkled with the light of souls flaring in pain and then snuffing out – the tithe in suffering and lives to keep their primarch-prince in the abyss of the real.

'You did not go with Lord Aurelian,' he said.

'Self-evidently true,' she said, then cocked her head to the side, blind eyes fixed on nothing. 'Well? Are you going to tell me what you see, or am I just going to have to imagine it?'

He shook his head.

'You ask the question, because you want me to ask it of you.'

She smiled, the expression cold.

'A fair point.' She paused. 'Well, aren't you going to ask? It is the question you have wanted to ask since you made your choice.'

Layak shook his head and looked away across the pyre-dotted plateau. Eight days of sacrifice and flame had burned the clouds away, and laced the ground with greasy ash.

'What do you see?' he asked, his voice low.

'I see the future balanced on the edges of a million swords. I see beginning. I see ending.'

'Will we succeed?'

'Not even the Warmaster asks that.' She paused again. 'Not even he knows that. The gods hold their breath, and if word is written of what shall come, I cannot read it.' She turned and looked at Layak. 'Does that give you comfort, Zardu Layak?' Her aura was shadowed silver, streaked with cold grey and black.

He turned away and began to walk down the ashen path between the pyre cages.

‘The sacrifices have been made,’ he said. ‘The propitiations are complete. It is time to go.’

The fires in the towering iron cages had cooled to embers; the flesh and bones they had held were now just charred tatters and ashes. The scent of cooking meat had faded as the screams had soaked into the warp. Eighty thousand had died on the plateau where once the Emperor had stood – not a true offering but a promise.

‘Atrocity is a necessity sometimes,’ said Actaea, following him. ‘Half of these idiots would do such things for pleasure.’

‘That is–’ began Layak.

‘That is the truth,’ said Actaea. ‘And what matters in the end is that humanity knows the truth. Everything else was hope and pride.’

They reached the ramp of the nearest Stormbird. Its hull was the crimson of the Word Bearers, but the Eye of Horus now marked its flank, branded into it by fire to show its allegiance to the Anointed Warmaster of Chaos.

He mounted the ramp, but Actaea did not follow. Layak paused at the top and looked back at her.

‘I released the binding on Prince Fulgrim. But… I can’t remember anything before the journey to find him… I don’t know who I am.’

‘Consequences, Zardu Layak. You were used, but even those who are slaves must pay a price. Everyone does in the end.’

‘Then why do I go on?’

‘Because even without a self, you have faith,’ she said.

He was silent for a long moment.

‘Ask,’ she said.

Layak felt his cheek twitch inside his mask.

‘It was you, wasn’t it?’ he said. ‘You revealed Lorgar’s intention to Horus. Somehow you told him what was planned.’

Actaea’s smile did not alter. She walked up the ramp until she was standing just in front of him and then put a hand out, and tapped the iron Eye of Horus, newly set at the centre of his breastplate.

‘The truth, Zardu Layak, is the greatest force in the universe. It is not kind. It is not a shield against cruelty. It is the most dangerous thing you can hold, and it is all that matters.’

‘And the gods?’

‘The gods are *a* truth,’ she said. She dropped her hand from his chest and began to walk back down the ramp.

‘And you?’ came the call, when she was almost at the bottom. ‘I have talked to half a dozen of the Word Bearers’ hierarchy. There was no one of your name amongst the Oracles of the Ashen Saint, no one of your description or power. Yet there you were, waiting for us on Orcus…’

She stopped at the bottom of the ramp, the smile twitching slightly wider beneath her cowl. She turned her face towards him, blind eyes seeing everything and nothing.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

She tilted her head pointedly up at the sky above.

‘You should not delay. Horus awaits your word that the rites are complete,’ she said. ‘And eternity has waited long enough.’

‘Do the gods truly want us to win?’

She let out a breath and brushed a flake of ash from her cheek with a bloodstained finger. The ramp began to lift. The gunship began to rise into the air as the scream of its thrusters built.

‘Farewell, Zardu Layak,’ said Actaea, and then the sight of her was gone, and he was lifting away into the night sky.

Argonis

The last gunship lifted from the surface of Ullanor, rising through the columns of smoke until it cut into the void above. It flew to the ship that lay at the heart of the cloud of warships waiting above the desecrated world. A hangar bay high on the command fortress swallowed it. Argonis waited for it to set down, and then for Zardu Layak to descend to the deck. The Crimson Apostle, flanked by his twin slaves, paused at the foot of the ramp. The Eye of Horus gleamed bright on the crimson of the cloak pinned to his back. He bowed his head to Argonis, and then looked up.

‘The libations have been poured. The offerings burned.’

Argonis gave a nod of acknowledgement and began his walk to the throne room. He walked alone, his staff of office marking his steps down silent corridors. Human officers and slaves abased themselves as he passed, and Legion warriors clenched their fists in salute. His steps rang through the silence until he reached the doors of the throne room. They opened for him without him having to pause.

Horus looked up from his place on his throne. Argonis held his own gaze steady as his mind shook. The Mournival stood at the foot of the throne. All of them turned at his entering, cold eyes following him. The chained

furnace of the Red Angel burned close to Abaddon. At the edge of sight, N'kari slithered and slid between the pillars, flowing from bloated beauty to wasp-thin terror like mercury. He felt his mind stretch and creak as sensations pulled at his will.

He reached the throne, mounted the first step and knelt. Every part of him wanted to never rise, to never look at what sat there.

'It is done?' asked Horus.

'Yes, sire.'

Horus rose. Armour and shadow shook and flowed as he stepped from his throne and descended to stand in front of the great viewport behind it.

'Vox-link to all ships,' he said. His eyes were unblinking holes in the fabric of his face.

'The link is active,' said Argonis.

'The hour is here,' said Horus, his voice not raised but echoing in the ears of millions, all of them waiting for one word, the word that had followed them as a promise of glory, vengeance and slaughter.

'Terra,' said the Warmaster.

Ekaddon

Ekaddon stood at the centre of the training chamber, stripped to the waist, his knife in his hand. The deck around him was clean, scraped and cleansed until the blade marks shone. He felt the walls rumble with the song of engines as the great ship pushed through the tides of the warp.

A low sound made him freeze for a second.

He smiled. He checked the binding on the medallion of the Cathartidae. It was firm. The stone disc felt warm against his skin. He closed his eyes and flicked the knife from hand to hand. The chamber and shadows were still.

'You are losing your touch,' he said, opening his eyes and smiling into the dark. No answer came. 'Unless, of course, you wanted me to realise you were here.'

A figure stepped into the half-light. He was a legionary, but like Ekaddon he had shed his power armour. A tunic of black carbon fibre-weave covered his torso and hung to his knees. Tattoos of birds spread down his exposed arms.

'Greetings, lord equerry,' said Ekaddon, inclining his head.

'Kalus,' said Argonis, his gaze steady.

Ekaddon flicked the knife into the air again, caught it, grinned.

‘The Unscarred replaces the Twisted… I suppose it makes a sort of sense.’

Argonis walked closer, his hands empty and by his sides.

‘The Warmaster–’

‘Honours and appreciates all you did.’

‘But others do not.’

Argonis shook his head.

‘Kibre, and Abaddon,’ breathed Ekaddon.

‘There are limits to forgiveness.’

‘They can be dealt with though, surely. Pride healed, feathers smoothed… A test for your diplomacy and new authority.’

‘The unity of the Legion must be maintained.’

Ekaddon looked at his brother, the grin still in place but his eyes holding sorrow.

‘Do you miss it? Cthonia I mean, the old times.’

‘We were children,’ said Argonis, stopping three paces from Ekaddon.

‘Yes,’ said Ekaddon, grinning wider. ‘Murderous children.’

Argonis smiled, the expression cracking the smooth skin of his face. In his eyes, the light of fires in remembered tunnels flared.

‘Would you?’ he had asked, and his blood brother had grinned. ‘If you were given my death coin, would you do it?’

‘No,’ he said and aimed a light punch at Argonis’ shoulder. ‘Might try, though, just to see.’

‘See what?’

‘If I could do it, if you are really that sharp.’

‘I am.’

‘Well, now I know, don’t I.’

And their laugher cut the shadows.

In the dark of the duelling chamber at the heart of the *Vengeful Spirit*, Argonis took the mirror coin from a pouch at his waist and tossed it into the centre of the circle. It fell with a chime of silver, its blank face pale and bright against the scarred stone. Ekaddon looked at it and then up at Argonis.

‘Shall we?’ he said.

Argonis nodded and stepped forwards.

EPILOGUE

War's End

Red touched the edge of the sky as he walked along the triumphal highway. It was still deserted, but activity stirred in the camps that lined its margins. The first of the transport craft were rising into the air to make way for their kin. Soldiers mustered in small groups for the first of many inspections. Engines turned over in the bellies of tanks and shouted orders disturbed the whisper of the dust wind. Horus Lupercal watched the world wake from beneath his falsehood and walked on, passing his own guards, entering the pavilion made of a dozen drop-ships. None saw him; he passed like a ghost.

'Did you find enlightenment, lord?' Maloghurst was waiting in the planning chamber, bent over layers of plans and stacks of data-slates. He did not look up.

'After a fashion,' said Horus as he pulled the falsehood off.

'This is going to be a lot of trouble,' said Maloghurst, frowning over a stream of data. 'The marshalling of all the might of mankind… I can't help but feel that apart from the giddy sense of power, the chief experience is going to be a feeling that there is always something that I am not seeing.'

'You presume that I am going to accept, Mal.'

Maloghurst looked up, meeting his primarch's gaze for a second.

'You will, lord.'

Horus gave a half-smile.

'So I am told.'

'The other choices are no choice at all.'

'Is that so, Mal?' he said, holding his gaze steady on his equerry. Maloghurst shrugged.

'Given everything, given your nature, yes.' Maloghurst made his best attempt at a smile of his own. 'That is unless you would rather leave the

future to someone else.’

‘It had crossed my mind…’

‘Only as the moon must cross the sky. You know you will do this, must do this. The Emperor knows. You just have to…’

‘What, Mal? What must I do?’

‘Accept it, lord.’

Horus formed a reply, then pulled it back from his tongue. He drew a breath, tasting every layer of scent and chemical in the planning chamber. Then, editing his senses down with an act of will to something that a human might recognise, he held himself in that limited circle of knowledge and feeling.

‘All right,’ he said, at last. ‘All right, then we had best get this started, right, Mal?’

Maloghurst looked up, paused and held Horus’ gaze.

‘Indeed.’

Horus smiled and let his mind expand to hear the world waking to a day that would see him Warmaster.

‘Let us begin,’ he said.

AFTERWORD

What is Chaos?

This question is at the heart of the book you hold in your hands. On the face of it, the answer is quite simple. Chaos is the dark force that exists in the warp. This force is exemplified by the four Dark Gods of Chaos: Khorne, Tzeentch, Nurgle and Slaanesh. The gods want to crush reality and they offer power to those mortals who serve them. This power most often comes in the form of tentacles, supernatural abilities, and a sudden love of grisly trophies and eight-pointed stars. So far, so familiar, yes? And from a certain angle all of that is manifestly true, but it's not the whole truth. The truth is far, far worse, and that truth is what I wanted to show in *Slaves to Darkness*.

Chaos is elemental. The forces of the warp are regarded as gods, their servants as daemons, and their powers as sorcery. That is how mortals who know of the warp talk about Chaos, but that is a rationalisation of something much bigger and more terrifying. The forces of Chaos are not gods, in that they are not like people. They have sentience, a strange nightmare sentience patched together from the emotions of mortal races, but they are closer in nature to a cyclone than they are to a person. They are forces of eternal nature; raw and lethal, and wildly destructive. This is not because they choose to be, or because they enjoy it, any more than a flood chooses to sweep away a town, or a tornado flips over cars for kicks. They do what they do because that is what they are. They can be no other way. These powers oppose and antagonise each other like the poles of magnets. Despair and rot claw at the desire for perfection and endless pleasure, war sweeps away subtle power, and so on.

What does that have to do with the Horus Heresy and this book? It is important because it is the reason that the Traitors aren't made stronger by

falling to Chaos. They are made weaker. They are made slaves who can no longer choose their own path. Chaos pulls them apart, divides them, consumes them and sets Horus' forces against each other. It does not do this because it is a winning strategy, far from it; it does this because it can't help it. The great powers in the warp, the four that are called gods, can come together and apply their power to a single end, but this can only be temporary. As soon as they align they begin to split. And because they are elemental forces they do this messily, and with all the care of an earthquake.

But why don't Horus and his followers simply choose not to be swayed by these forces? Why don't they just take the good bits – the special powers – but stay focused and united in their goals? Because once Chaos has its claws in them, they have no choice. Once an individual has let Chaos take hold of them, their thoughts and emotions begin to resonate and amplify in harmony with the great powers. Other ways of seeing events wither in their perception. The manifest powers of Chaos become a release that can only be accessed by falling deeper into their embrace. Characters fall to Chaos, but they spiral as they fall. They try to escape, but their every choice now only takes them deeper. There is no way out for Horus and those that follow him, they are slaves and doomed through their own choices to fall apart and on each other with murder and treachery.

Once Chaos has hold of a mortal it enables the emotions that drove it into its arms, and feeds them in turn, so that they grow all-consuming and circular. Resentment becomes rage, becomes violence. Pride becomes arrogance. Knowledge becomes blindness to truth. And even if the soul that has fallen fights their fate, they still fall. To fall to Chaos is not to bow to the Chaos Gods, in fact it does not require that you even know that the Dark Gods exist. To rephrase the words hissed by the daemon Samos in the first Horus Heresy novel, *Horus Rising*: 'Chaos all around you… It is the person beside you… It is you…' The elemental power of the Chaos gods comes from the emotions of all sentient beings. Khorne does not exist because people worship it as a god of blood and war; Khorne exists because sentient creatures feel anger and rage, and want to destroy and kill and see their enemies broken. It does not matter to Tzeentch if a mortal who plots for power or hungers for knowledge does so in its name. The emotion and thought is enough to keep the cyclone turning.

That is what Chaos is, it is every weakness given power and set loose against itself without beginning and without end. That is the path that

Horus, Lorgar and the first heretics set themselves on when they embraced Chaos. That is, if you like, the point of this book – to show that Horus and those that led him and followed him into darkness have become slaves to forces that they cannot control, bound by the chains of their own natures.

John French,
Nottingham,
2018

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novels *Praetorian of Dorn* and *Tallarn*, the novella *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Dark Compliance*, *Templar* and *Warmaster*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Resurrection* and *Incarnation* for The Horusian Wars, the audio dramas *Agent of the Throne: Blood and Lies*, *Agent of the Throne: Truth and Dreams*, the Ahriman series and many short stories.

An extract from *Jaghatai Khan: Warhawk of Chogoris*.

The door shivered, its onyx panels already cracked and its carved jambs cracking. A storm blew through it, a roar of gold and white, as elemental as the summer gales on the Altak. A window pane shattered, sending teardrops of glass bouncing.

Courtiers scattered, hitching up heavy brocade robes and tottering like birds. A woman screamed, while a man stumbled and scrabbled on all fours towards the stairwell.

The storm paid them no heed. He strode through the crowd, eyes bright with a vital anger, towering over even the greatest and making them appear insignificant. In his wake came two armoured giants, clad in ivory and jasper, their heavy tread resounding on hard floors. All three titans glittered under the wheeling light of disturbed suspensors that set their scabbards and blade-pommels flashing.

‘His neck,’ said the Khagan of Chogoris, the Great Khan of the Fifth Legion Astartes, his long black hair flying loose. ‘If He does not learn to bend it, one day it will break.’

The primarch swept through the antechambers of the Imperial Palace, his cloak hem snapping like a whip about his heels. With him came the twin masters of his young army, Hasik and Giyahun, their bronze faces impassive.

Gold pillars soared up around them, chased and fluted and spiralled, inlaid with glass and studded with pearls. Marble statuary stood in blank isolation amid the mirrors and the porcelain, barred by the warm light of the Terran dawn.

A man in the robes of the Senatorum Imperialis emerged at the far end of the long gallery, took one look at the rampaging primarch, then darted out again. Other courtiers shrank back, bowing and stammering.

‘The mind – unequalled,’ the Khan growled, swinging into another hall. His closed fist punched out at a bulbous vase, and it shattered into a rain of echoing fragments. ‘But the neck. That is the weakness. That is the flaw.’

High windows passed by, leaded and mullioned, each offering glimpses of the immensity beyond – parapets rearing above parapets, glare-white from the mountain air. The Palace was a never-ending project, they said, a billion techwrights working on it daily to render the peaks into cathedrals of the mind and the soul, raising up monuments to Unity that would endure for eternity. No guns marred the ramparts in those days, only pennants and

propaganda, for war had left Terran skies a lifetime ago and now burned its way across the vaults of a deeper heaven.

‘He gazes on the infinite,’ the Khan spat, ‘but we are body, blood and bone.’

His retinue made no reply. They did not as much as glance at the finery around them; their eyes were fixed forwards, their sun-darkened faces held rigid. Both carried a long scar on their cheeks, zigzagged in ritual imitation of lightning, the kindler-destroyer of the borderless grass. Both understood that they were not being addressed. This was their master in his anger, unleashing the torrent as a mountain unleashes its storms.

‘Scorn not your tools, say the sages,’ the Khan said. ‘Scorn not the blade that cuts, lest it open your own veins.’

Another hall beckoned, another chamber within that cavernous interior, just as ornate, just as immaculate. Jewelled incense-drones swerved out of the primarch’s path, whining as their grav-plates struggled to gain loft.

The Khan halted at last. More than thirty figures barred the way ahead. Some were armoured as he was, arrayed in a variety of Crusade-pattern war-plate. Others wore the uniforms of the Imperial Army – stiff jerkins, high collars, flak-weave half cloaks. A scattering of them were wrapped in the long robes of officials.

Jaghatai Khan glared at them hungrily, as if poised to attack. His great fist, locked within an ivory gauntlet, flexed instinctively. The delegation shrank back; it was never easy to look a primarch in the eye, no matter one’s rank or training, and it was almost impossible to face an angry one.

‘Who dares this now?’ the Khan demanded.

Most did not speak. Some looked as if they had lost the capacity. Only one managed to return that gaze, and did so uneasily, as if he feared attracting the storm’s full wrath.

‘May it please you, lord,’ he started, ‘the ship is ready.’

The man was heavily built, old but not decrepit. His skin was lined, his muscle tone rigid, and he wore the dress uniform of an admiral in the Naval high command. In ordinary circumstances, he would have been a man of substance, one from whom many would take an order without question. Perhaps he had commanded many starships, and seen many worlds wreathed in the coronas of battle. Yet right then, just then, as he looked up into the face of one of the Emperor’s sons, he might as well have been a youth of sixteen on his first assignment.

The Khan rounded on him. ‘What ship?’

‘The one ordained for you.’

‘Without my knowledge.’ The Khan shot a sour smile at Hasik. ‘It’d better be a good one.’

The admiral swallowed. ‘The best, lord. The very best. A Gloriana.’

‘Those words mean nothing to me.’

‘Perhaps, then…’ The admiral’s eyes fell away. ‘Perhaps it would be better to see it, then.’

As soon as the words left his lips, he went white. He took an involuntary step backwards, flinching as if in anticipation of a blow.

The Khan stared at him. The air seemed to fizz a little, as if energy were coiling somewhere. The light around them thickened, and the ivory gauntlet clenched into a fist.

Then the primarch laughed. He looked over at Giyahun, who grinned back.

‘He thinks I’ll skin him alive,’ the Khan said, speaking to his gene-son in Khorchin, the kin-speech of the Talskar of Chogoris.

‘Give the order, Khagan. My knife grows blunt in this shit shed.’

‘Ha. We’re guests, and my Father objects to blood on his fine floors.’ The Khan looked back at the admiral. ‘I was told I had an army,’ he said, reverting back to thickly accented Gothic.

Another official stepped forwards then, a portly woman with a severe bob and jowly cheeks. ‘Ready for inspection, lord.’

‘I was told I had counsellors.’

A third shuffled into view, a thin man with an augmetic jawline and receding hair. ‘Whenever you wish to consult us, lord.’

Hasik raised an eyebrow. ‘Never been given an army before,’ he said in Khorchin. ‘Always had to take them.’

The Khan shot him a dry look. ‘No man gives a gift without expecting another in return. We didn’t come here with our hands full.’

‘As they never cease to make clear.’

The primarch turned back to the first speaker. ‘Where is it, then?’ he asked. For all his imposing demeanour, there was something in that question – an eagerness, only part suppressed by awareness of rank, as if he had been shown some ancient blade only offered to the sons of princes.

‘Void-dock above Luna, lord,’ the admiral replied. ‘Ready for examination whenever you deem fit.’

The Khan scrutinised him a little longer. ‘Who sent you here? Malcador? My Father? You know I come from Him now? You know what we talked of?’ He waved the stuttering answer away. ‘No matter. Take me there – I need to fill my lungs with purer air.’ He glanced back at Hasik. ‘You, go and see this army. See if it’ll fight, or if it’s as slack-gutted as everything else in this place.’

He gestured for Giyahun to follow him, then paused.

‘Where’s Yesugei?’ he asked.

‘Exploring,’ ventured Giyahun, shrugging.

The Khan looked amused. ‘One day that’ll get him into trouble.’ He summoned the admiral with a snap of his fingers. ‘Come. Show me this ship you’re so proud of. It had better be worth the journey.’

He stood in the chamber, chin raised, looking through the slender window. On the far side of the glass, a bird hopped across the stone sill. He watched it silently. The bird’s head turned, angling a jewelled eye towards him. For a moment, they stared at one another.

Then a door creaked, tripping an announcement chime, and the creature fluttered away in a snap of feathers.

He watched it go, before turning to see who had entered.

A woman stood in the doorway. She was tall, her face angular. She wore deep green robes and bore the stylised I-icon of the Imperium atop a long metal staff.

‘My apologies,’ she said. ‘Am I disturbing you?’

He bowed. ‘Not at all.’ He beckoned her in. ‘Come.’

Only when she stepped under the light of the lumens was it apparent how tall she was. Most humans looked like children beside one of the Legiones Astartes, but she didn’t. Perhaps that was due to her physical presence; perhaps something else.

‘I was told you’d found your way here,’ she said, looking around the chamber. ‘Not many come this far up.’

The walls around them were decayed, a mottled stone that had aged and rotted. Packing crates lay about the floor, most filled with old machinery. A defunct cogitator stood in the shadows, its data-maw empty and gaping. The window looked out over far newer reaches of the Palace, all coronets of gold and silver, sharp-edged against the eye-watering dazzle from the mountains.

‘Old, this place,’ he said, smiling apologetically. ‘Like me. Too old, they said.’

The woman leaned against the wall opposite him. ‘For induction into the Legions? It depends. Sometimes the seed takes, sometimes it doesn’t. Your Legion took a surprising number of post-adolescents. I wonder why?’

‘Forgive,’ he said, clasping his hands together in gesture of politeness. ‘Who are you?’

‘Magister Niasta. The office of the Sigillite. I was asked to make myself known to you. That proved harder than anticipated – you don’t stick to your itineraries. None of you do.’

He bowed. ‘Is true. I am–’

‘I know who you are.’ She looked at him carefully, a half-smile playing on her lips. ‘Tell me if I pronounce it right – *zadyin arga*, Targutai Yesugei.’

‘Excellent. You speak Khorchin. If we may?’

‘Afraid not. I know those two words, nothing else. They tell me it’s damned hard to learn.’

Yesugei gave a rueful smile. ‘And other way round. Will take time.’

‘The lexicographers will have the syntax decoded in a month. Then at least we’ll be able to use transcoder beads. Until then, it’s fumbling and stumbling.’

‘Fumbling and stumbling,’ Yesugei repeated, liking the sound of the words. ‘Yes, all of us.’

‘The rest, maybe. You, not so much.’ She ran her finger absent-mindedly up the length of the staff, right under the iron symbol of Malcador’s office. ‘You have an interesting mind, Targutai Yesugei. I sensed it when your delegation arrived, and now I’m standing close to you, I feel it more strongly. You know what I mean, I think.’

He smiled. Like all his kin, when he smiled his whole face creased. ‘Weather-magic,’ he said. ‘They told us it causes trouble.’

‘Weather-magic? How quaint. I’ve seen reports of what you can do with it. I think you’d better come up with a better name.’

‘Suits us.’

‘But it’s dangerous, this business.’ She looked at him more seriously. ‘That’s why we brought you here. Well, it’s one of many reasons, but an important one. You don’t hide it. You don’t seem to feel the need. I could admire that, but you’ll need to learn to.’

Yesugei looked at her quizzically.

‘Your master is the fifteenth primarch to be located,’ Niasta said. ‘His brothers were all brought here, just as he has been, and inducted into the ways of the Crusade. I saw them all come, one by one, ushered into the Palace and cloistered with the Emperor. Then I saw them go again, out into the void, where they now forge the Imperium at the head of the mightiest armies ever created. Each one of them would be a monarch on his own if allowed to be, an emperor greater than any that’s gone before, and yet they fight not for themselves, but for a greater vision. *His* vision.’

Yesugei nodded. ‘Is understood.’

‘Then you understand the danger. It is Unity. It is conformity. It has inherent vice. They must learn, all of them, and they must trust. So many of them find that difficult. How could they not? Even I struggle with it, and I’m not tempted by your outrageous martial prowess.’

‘This, also, is understood.’

Niasta laughed. ‘So you know what’s coming. The Khan has spoken with his Father often since we brought you to Terra, and we know it’s not gone well. This is not uncommon, but we need it to go better.’

Yesugei sighed, and looked out of the window again. ‘Tell him, then. I am not master – he is.’

‘This is our message – there are no gods, there is no magic, there is only reason. This is our only weapon, the one sanctioned by Him, beloved of all, who set this thing in motion.’

‘Is nonsense.’

Niasta smiled tolerantly. ‘Which is, I gather, exactly what the Khan told the Emperor. And that’s what’s giving my master considerable trouble, and when our respective masters are at loggerheads, it falls to us to smooth things over.’

‘Logger heads?’

‘You know precisely what I mean.’

Yesugei smiled sadly, knowingly. ‘You wish us to lie.’

‘We wish you to be sensible.’

‘He will never lie.’ Yesugei lost his smile. ‘He has fault. All men have fault. But not this. He make an oath, the oath is kept. You understand?’

‘This is not about truth,’ Niasta said, just a trace of exasperation creeping into her polished voice. ‘It doesn’t need to be.’

Yesugei pursed his cracked lips. The ritual tattoos flexed as his skin moved, forming new and esoteric shapes across sun-toughened flesh. ‘We

are warriors. We have weapon, we use it. Does not master us, we master it. That is balance.'

'He needs to meet the Sigillite,' Niasta said. 'He needs to meet Malcador.'

Yesugei shrugged. 'May not be possible.'

'Make it possible.'

He turned to face her, looking at her carefully for the first time. 'Your eyes,' he said. 'What happened?'

Niasta looked away. 'Soul-binding,' she said. 'Most lose them.'

'Soul-binding,' Yesugei mused, softly. 'So there are souls, then.'

'Do not be obtuse.'

'Be honest, with me. You have sight, both kinds. What is inner sense used for?'

'I am not used. I serve.'

'Now, yes. The future – who knows?' He drew closer, and his golden eyes reflected the light from the window. 'What you sense in me, Niasta, I sense in you. But be careful. We do not lie, even to ourselves. Perhaps you do.'

'Get him to meet Malcador. That's all I need.'

Yesugei hesitated, as if he wanted to say more. Then he thought better of it and turned away, back to the window.

'I do what I can,' he said.

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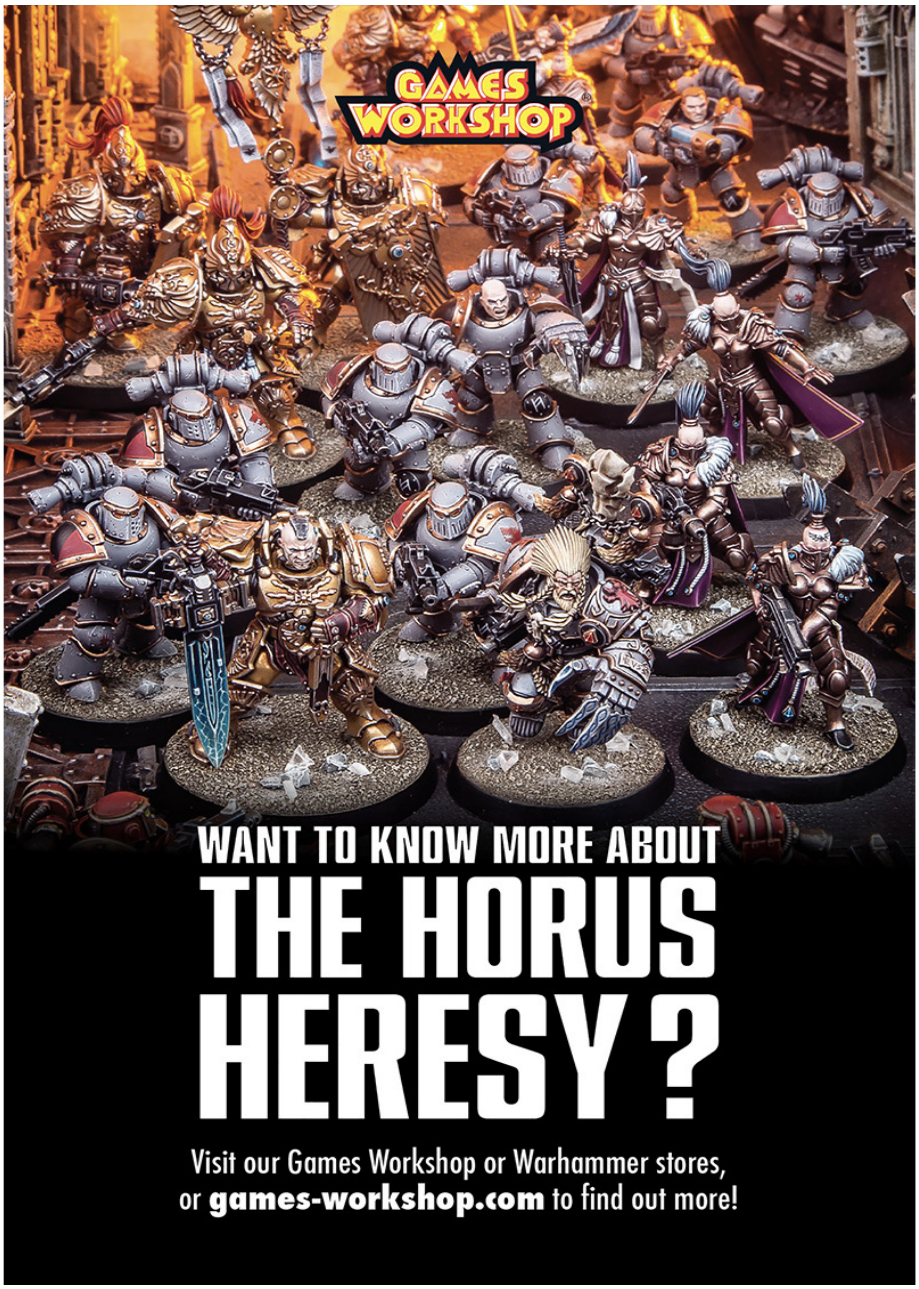
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Table of Contents

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
The Horus Heresy
- Dramatis Personae
  - Prologue
- Part One
  - One
  - Two
  - Three
  - Four
- Part Two
  - Five
  - Six
  - Seven
  - Eight
  - Nine
  - Ten
  - Eleven
  - Twelve
  - Thirteen
  - Fourteen
  - Fifteen
- Part Three
  - Sixteen
  - Seventeen
  - Eighteen
  - Nineteen
  - Epilogue
  - Afterword

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